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Grassroots in the Wetlands

The Saving of the Watsonville Sloughs Watershed

A growing number of citizens, concerned about preserving the Watsonville Slough System, banded together as Watsonville Wetlands Watch. This article chronicles their efforts to protect the slough's environmental resources and promote the associated educational and recreational opportunities, all built on a foundation of community engagement.

Pajaro Valley Wetlands Today

The Watsonville Slough System is a highly valued and unique environmental resource as the largest remaining freshwater coastal wetland along the central coast of California. Six individual sloughs (Watsonville, Harkins, Struve, West Branch Struve, Gallighan, and Hanson) make up the system that ultimately drains to the Monterey Bay. The adjoining hillsides and upland areas contain important wildlife habitats including grassland, oak woodland, and chaparral. The area's mild coastal climate and highly productive soils have allowed for year-round production of valuable crops around some of the sloughs and in much of the surrounding rural areas. Today these resources are valued not only for their economic benefits, but also for the environmental, recreational, and educational assets that they provide to the local and regional communities. But getting to this point of view was not easy.

Beginning in 1991, in response to a lineup of numerous urban development proposals that threatened the Pajaro Valley's wetlands and uplands, a tenacious group of concerned citizens came together and became a major player in the environmental protection and educational opportunity arena of the Pajaro Valley and

the Monterey Bay area overall. As its first mission statement declared, the Watsonville Wetlands Watch (Wetlands Watch) is "dedicated to the protection, restoration, and appreciation of the wetlands of the Pajaro Valley."

Initially, the ideas of Wetlands Watch were rejected on numerous projects and issues involving preservation of the wetlands, but ultimately, through increased influence and grassroots mobilization, and at times via litigation, the organization garnered greater respect and cooperation developed. This process increasingly involved partnership efforts with others—including social justice, environmental and agricultural groups who joined together in support of protecting the community's natural resources while also addressing social needs.

Today the agricultural lands west of Highway 1 (toward Monterey Bay), and by proximity the wetlands themselves, are protected through conservation easements for both agricultural and wildlife values, as well as through the county's Measure J growth management policies. A further significant milestone in this direction was the adoption of policies by the County of Santa Cruz, City of Watsonville, and California Coastal Commission in 2000, restricting urban development into the coastal zone, beyond the city's westerly boundary line.

Geographic Setting

The Watsonville Slough System drains a 12,500 acre (19.5 square mile) watershed from the coastal plain and foothills of southern Santa Cruz County into Monterey

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Bay. The City of Watsonville lies in the southeastern portion of the watershed, the remainder is within unincorporated Santa Cruz County. Watsonville Slough originates in the southeastern side of the watershed within the City of Watsonville, flows westward along the northern edge of the Pajaro River floodplain, intercepting drainage from tributary sloughs before discharging into the mouth of the Pajaro River. The valleys of the tributary sloughs are entrenched within coastal terraces where the terrain is characterized by flat valley floors of marsh and riparian wetlands with steep adjacent hillsides of grasslands, oak woodland and chaparral.¹

California State Highway 1 roughly divides the watershed into eastern and western halves and is a major demarcation of land use. To the west, land is within the Coastal Zone and generally agricultural with isolated areas of industrial uses (Lee Road) and municipal landfills (Buena Vista Road and San Andreas Road). To

the east, the sloughs are generally surrounded by urban uses, denser and industrial in the south (City of Watsonville) and rural to the north (Larkin Valley) and east. Land coverage throughout most of the watershed includes marsh and riparian cover on the valley floors, and agricultural, urban, industrial and rural residential uses or undeveloped land on the hillsides.

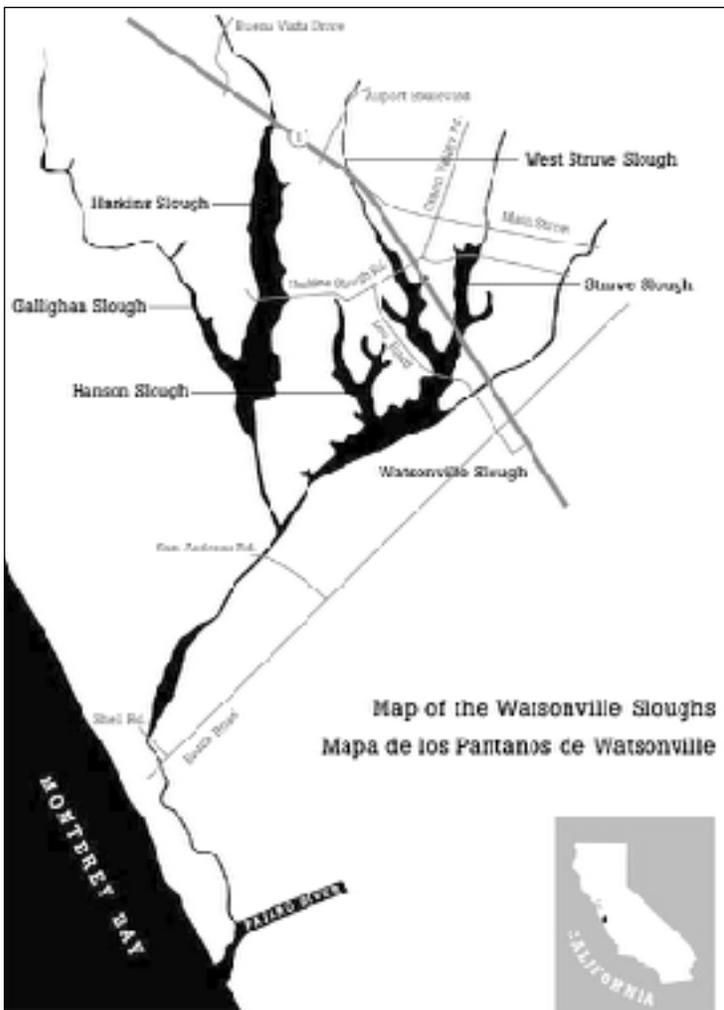
Physical and Biological Value of Wetlands

Wetlands are important to coastal hydrology by providing groundwater recharge and flood water storage. Wetlands filter pollutants and regulate water chemistry. In addition, wetlands provide food, cover and breeding grounds for aquatic and terrestrial wildlife.² The Watsonville Slough System, located along the Pacific Flyway provides a crucial resting place for many species of migrating birds,³ and supports more than 270 resident and migratory bird species along with a diversity of other wildlife, including 37 special status wildlife species and 15 special status plant species.⁴ In addition to supporting a high abundance and diversity of resident wildlife, these wetlands also support migrating bird species by providing abundant food sources, cover, and open water resting areas that are critical for success in reaching their breeding/wintering grounds. The marshes and associated grassland/scrub habitats attract and support a number of foraging animals that are residents of nearby woodlands and chaparral. The slough channels, with their adjacent upland and riparian habitats, provide natural movement and dispersal corridors for resident wildlife.

The freshwater Watsonville Wetland System is very different from Elkhorn Slough, a seven-mile-long tidal slough and estuary located down the coast, inland from Moss Landing, designated a National Estuarine Research Reserve in 1979, whose salt to brackish waters support a different set of flora and fauna. Freshwater wetlands are significant because so few remain and because the seasonal pattern of winter flooding and dry season drawdown is a critical feature for the birds, providing different habitat conditions in different seasons and increasing the productivity of aquatic habitat for foraging birds.⁵

Historical and Human Uses

California lost over 90 percent of its wetlands between the 1780s and mid-1980s, to agriculture and other land uses.⁶ Locally, 61 to 70 percent of the Watsonville Wetlands Complex were converted prior to



The four sloughs surround the city of Watsonville are shown here. (Map courtesy of Watsonville Wetlands Watch)

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December 23, 1985.⁷ By the mid 1950s the historical practice of viewing natural resources for profit-making purposes expanded as the state and region boomed following the end of World War II. For the Pajaro Valley, this principally took place through the conversion of wetland and upland habitats for agricultural purposes. The negative social and ecological impacts of these actions were overshadowed by the fact that these areas represented some of the most available developable lands.

Beginning in the late 1970s, growing opposition to the loss of wetland resources began to make its mark through governmental, legal, and community-based actions. The Environmental Council, formed in 1978, through its legal arm, the Resource Defense Fund, filed suit in February 1979 to stop the County of Santa Cruz from issuing building permits “which might be inconsistent with Measure J.” (Measure J, passed the previous year by county voters, requires the county to set an annual growth limit, direct growth into urban areas, protect rural areas, designate 15 percent of all new housing for low-income persons, and allocate building permits accordingly.) Attempts to sidestep Measure J continued in the spring of 1979 through efforts to remove the area from Highway 1 to San Andreas Road in the Pajaro Valley from the Coastal Zone and attempts by realtors Hare, Brewer & Kelley who sought “special treatment” for their “South County land” so that it would no longer be declared agricultural land. With support from community-based groups, individuals and the Board of Supervisors, these initiatives were halted.

In the 1980s, local opposition again arose in response to a peat-mining excavation project focused on Harkins, Hansen, and West Struve Sloughs. Advocacy by the Santa Cruz Bird Club, Jerry Busch, and Randall Morgan against a deal between the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG, now called the California Department of Fish and Wildlife) and the mining company, Old Fort Industries, drew the public’s attention. CDFG had approved this “restoration” project despite the fact that it would convert up to 300 acres of wetlands to permanent ponds (after the mining of peat). In exchange, the CDFG was granted deeds and easements over the wetland and upland parcels involved in the peat-mining project. One of these parcels now supports the State Ecological Reserve on Lee Road. Busch said that “Randy Morgan’s letter in opposition to the peat mining beautifully described the importance of Watsonville’s sloughs to waterfowl and other wildlife, and inspired me to join the fight for their protection.”

Ultimately, the peat-mining operations were short-lived and the damage to the wetlands not as extensive as originally proposed. But the news of what had happened became part of the local advocacy history as a new era was about to dawn. Similarly, a proposal by the City of Watsonville to build the Westridge Business Park drew public opposition. This was the first effort to protect the sloughs and upland habitat from development. Westridge went forward but yielded a new champion of local environmental protection—Randy Repass, President of West Marine, who found every window of his new headquarters filled with views of wetlands. Repass and his wife, Sally-Christine Rodgers, had recently moved to the Pajaro Valley, and both became leading supporters of slough conservation and regional planning.

Birth and Growth of Environmental Advocacy in the Pajaro Valley

City of Watsonville politics made a historic shift in 1989, following the legal mandate (from the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund) that Watsonville establish district elections for City Council members. The new seven-member council, elected in November of 1989, was composed of four left-liberal representatives, including Todd McFarren, who, as the new mayor, was concerned about preserving agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands from urban encroachment. At the same time, a group of concerned community members began meeting in response to a proposed 940-unit housing development on 150 acres of grasslands and uplands on the east side of Highway 1, adjacent to the Struve Slough wetlands (an area that is behind what is now the Overlook Shopping Center).

Proposed by J. Lohr Properties as “The Villages” in 1990, the project needed the city to revise its general plan zoning from a designation of Industrial to Residential. Issues raised by this amendment to the general plan included threats to Santa Cruz tarplant conservation (listed as an endangered plant species by the State of California) and potential loss of grasslands and inadequate slough buffers. Organizing to protect the Santa Cruz tarplant and Struve Slough gained momentum through actions that included letters and meetings with the Nature Conservancy and Coastal Conservancy for acquisition funding; State representatives Sam Farr and Henry Mello for inclusion of the site in state bills and budget plans; meetings with local elected officials, including the engagement of full

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support from Mayor McFarren; as well as a legal challenge based upon the loss of a protected endangered plant species

The core group of environmentalists, including Dick Bernard, Jerry Busch, Christine Johnson-Lyons, Karen Mora, and David Leland, quickly expanded to 40 local people, with the new support from some of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation docents, including Jim and Ellie Van Houten and Caroline Rodgers. During the spring of 1991, this group launched a new organization, under the name Watsonville Wetlands Watch (Wetlands Watch) “to ensure that the Watsonville Slough System remained intact,” as stated in their first newsletter published in January 1992.

Mayor McFarren recalls that he “was pleased that Watsonville had its own, locally based environmental organization and especially one that presented such sound, fact-based arguments. When constituents like these report to the Council on items of concern, council members hear it,” McFarren concluded.⁸ As a local Pajaro Valley group, Wetlands Watch was able to avoid the “outsider” label that had stymied previous efforts to lobby for environmentalism in Watsonville. Their views received the benefit of supportive news coverage in the local media, including a four-part series in the *Register Pajaronian*⁹ on the Pajaro Valley wetlands and related advocacy efforts—followed by an editorial by Mike Wallace, editor, calling for short- and long-term preservation of the sloughs.¹⁰

As a result of the group’s multi-pronged efforts, J. Lohr dropped his “Villages” project in late 1991. Later, the project was taken over by real estate agent Chuck Allen and a group of investors, with the project name changed to Landmark property. Wetlands Watch’s legal challenge, led by Jerry Busch and Jim Van Houten, was settled to permanently protect the six acres of Santa Cruz tarplant, now called Tarplant Hill. Through funding from the Coastal Conservancy, the property was acquired by Wetlands Watch. Today, Tarplant Hill not only remains a permanently protected area, but has increased the upland habitat adjoining the slough and provides opportunities for community involvement through education, restoration, and passive recreation. The Landmark Estates development was scaled down in size, and conditions were put in place requiring greater setbacks of 150 feet from the wetlands and today includes several segments of the Watsonville Slough Trail system.

With a quarterly newsletter, monthly meetings, frequent birding walks, slough clean-ups, and interpretive programs, all open to the public, Wetlands Watch was off and running, both in the political and community arenas. “It was a busy time” said Karen Mora, local teacher and Wetlands Watch founder, “monthly public meetings offered informative talks on various aspects of the natural resources found in the valley’s wetlands. Field trips were conducted. Slough cleanups and other restoration projects were underway.”¹¹ The group had a general membership structure with a steering committee that set the monthly meeting agendas and conducted committee business.

Initial working committees included the Education, Restoration, and Legislative committees. Administrative duties of Wetlands Watch were carried out by these committees, with members serving as leads. The general membership meetings provided the venue for updates about the committee work and plans. Quickly the organization’s focus expanded to other current issues that could affect the Pajaro Valley’s wetland resources, such as the Pajaro River Flood Control Project, as well as the push for and establishment of multiple research projects with Technical Advisory Committees (that almost always included a Wetlands Watch representative).

In 1993, with over 200 members, the group began considering obtaining nonprofit status. It was obtained in 1999 with its first directors: Jerry Busch, Clay Kempf, Carol Whitehill, Bob Culbertson, and Jim Van Houten.



The first official clean-up of Watsonville Wetlands Watch on November 16, 1991. Top, left to right: Colette King, Christine Johnson-Lyons, Bob Lyons, Michael Kenner. Bottom, left to right: Marth Kenner, Andrew Kenner, Eric Kenner, Dot Steele. (Photo by Christine Johnson-Lyons)

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In the 27 years since its launching, Wetlands Watch has matured into to a highly effective force for local conservation, education, and community building.

Since its inception in 1991, the Wetlands Watch has focused on wetland education. The Watsonville sloughs were difficult to access and relatively unknown at that time, so it was imperative to educate the public about their existence and their importance in order to advocate for their preservation. Early public education efforts were informal and eclectic. Restoration (slough cleanups and habitat enhancement projects), bird walks and artists' paintings and photographs were all employed in this process. Local artists persevered in painting the sloughs with enthusiasm for capturing these hidden places of beauty. Writing for Wetlands Watch, Jerry Busch's book, *Watching the Watsonville Wetlands*, published in 2000 by Wetlands Watch, furthered these educational efforts.



Corralitos resident Mary Warshaw, known for her images of local landscapes, paints the Watsonville Slough from the Pajaro Dunes in 2000. (Photo courtesy of Watsonville Wetlands Watch)

Smart Land Use Planning and Advocacy for Conservation Issues Were the Methods Used to Save the Watsonville Sloughs

In addition to the onslaught of residential development proposals in the 1990s, the City of Watsonville was concurrently:

- 1) developing a new general plan with the intention to incorporate lands west of Highway 1 into the city's sphere of influence based upon projections that the City of Watsonville's population was expected to increase by 62 percent between 1990 and 2005;¹²

- 2) considering, as a general plan "study area," a 1,800-unit residential development, with a commercial

center and golf course, proposed by Tai and Associates on 646 acres of coastal agricultural land and in the very heart of the Watsonville Slough wetlands in the coastal zone west of the intersection of Lee Road and Harkins Slough;

- 3) urging the Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD) to select the environmentally sensitive Edwards site, west of Highway 1 and far from housing (corner of Lee Road and Harkins Slough Road), for the site for a new high school to reduce overcrowding at the existing high schools (Watsonville and Aptos).

These actions by the city were notable and strongly opposed because of the potential growth-inducing aspects of urban expansion into the rich wetland and agricultural resources in the Coastal Zone—necessarily leading to the loss of agricultural and biotic resources in the name of meeting social needs. But Wetlands Watch and others saw this promotion as a false pretext resulting in urban sprawl and mostly low-paying jobs that would only force low-income residents into more overcrowding and greater poverty. As early as 1992, the Wetlands Watch released and actively promoted a list of low-income housing policy proposals. These were included as one of eight documents submitted to the City Council in written and oral form regarding the *Draft Watsonville 2005 General Plan*.

During the spring of 1993, unprecedented in Watsonville's history, an alliance was established between the Farm Bureau, Wetlands Watch, and low-income housing advocates who united to challenge the *Draft Watsonville 2005 General Plan* based on its loss of agricultural and environmentally sensitive areas and failure to develop a comprehensive affordable housing plan and program. At a press conference held on May 19, 1993, in front of the Watsonville City Hall, the following alliance representatives presented their views: Kirk Schmidt, of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau; Pedro Castillo, of the League of United Latin American Citizens; and Christine Johnson-Lyons of Wetlands Watch. Their joint recommendation was to focus residential growth "in the direction of Buena Vista/Calabasas and within the existing west side city limits with the highest feasible density that is possible."

No sooner had the general plan been approved by the City Council in May 1994, than Wetlands Watch had to again mobilize, participate in council meetings, and advocate for the importance of preserving wetlands and wetland habitat by calling for the rejection of the General Plan's Update and Sphere of Influence Amendment¹³ to expand west of Highway 1 on 646

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acres as part of Tai & Associates plan for 1,800 housing units and a golf course. The major issue was the leapfrogging of urban development into the coastal zone. Other issues included protection of prime agricultural land and wetlands, traffic and the extension of city services. Wetlands Watch continued its challenge to both the proposal and the process publicly, in coalition with other groups, and in court. After narrowly losing the council's support, Wetlands Watch and the Sierra Club filed a legal challenge. A ruling favorable to Wetlands Watch was issued by Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Samuel Stevens.

There were many more residential development projects in the works. All were similar in their lack of measures to protect the natural resource value of the sloughs. Wetlands Watch participated fully in the review of these projects, often in coordination with other groups both formally and informally, including the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, Sierra Club, California Native Plant Society, Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), Derechos Humanos/Watsonville Human Rights Committee, and others.

Advocacy

Wetlands Watch members promoted smart growth planning, concerned that the low-density residential model of development on or near upland habitat and prime farmland would ultimately lead to a "pave paradise and put up a parking lot" future for the Pajaro Valley. Wetlands Watch members called for a new way to look at the social and economic problems of the Valley that did not compromise the natural resources—using extensive media coverage, cross-sector alliances, and, on certain issues, as a last resort, legal challenge. Wetlands Watch, with five other local groups, cosponsored a community forum, "Which Way Watsonville?" at the Episcopal Church on November 29, 1994. Among the issues that Wetlands Watch and others confronted was the Pajaro Valley Unified School District's (PVUSD) recent announcement of their selection of the Edwards property, west of Highway 1, for the new high school. This decision, made after years of meetings and public debate, raised strong concerns about further development west of Highway 1.

The school district's site choice, supported by the City of Watsonville, met with objections from Wetlands Watch, the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, and the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), whose members preferred the Console property alternative on

Main Street next to Ramsey Park, due to its proximity to the urbanized area of Watsonville (making access easier for students) as well as to commercial and recreational properties and services.

This alternative evaporated in 1996 when the Console property was sold to DBO (Donald B. Orozco), a development company in Monterey that proposed the site for construction of a commercial shopping center. This was despite the fact that Wetlands Watch and others actively pushed for maintaining this site's zoning for residential use in order to reduce pressure to annex coastal areas for housing and by concentrating commercial development in downtown. Wetlands Watch was present at every City Council meeting on this issue, and submitted written testimony, including recommendations for alternative options.

Wetlands Watch also opposed the DBO project on the former Console property because of concerns about its encroachment into Struve Slough and an informal slough trails system, a network of walking and bike paths used by locals, and the absence of adequate plans to protect and restore the slough. The city wanted this project not only for its sales tax revenue, but also because it would provide the street improvements needed to open lands on the "westside" of Watsonville (east of Highway 1) for future development. Ultimately, Wetlands Watch and the Derechos Humanos/Watsonville Human Rights Committee who had filed suit, settled after receiving commitments by the developer to protect and restore portions of Struve Slough, along with measures to improve the opportunities for the workforce. The city allowed the zoning changes and the Overlook Commercial Center was constructed with Target as its anchor store.

In 1997, the city made unsuccessful attempts to annex 216 acres of surrounding unincorporated prime agricultural lands along Riverside Drive and the coastal area west of Highway 1 and the Manabe/Bergstrom properties for industrial and commercial uses. This experience led the city to re-think its planning process. Instead of litigating, the city joined with the environmental, agricultural and labor organizations in a multi-year consensus project led by Action Pajaro Valley, which resulted in the growth management strategy known as Measure U.

Measure U, the agreement to establish an urban limit line, was approved by city voters in 2002, and supported by 60 percent of Watsonville voters after a major campaign launched by a coalition that included Wetlands Watch, provided extensive public education

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and advocacy. The measure was designed to protect commercial agricultural lands and environmentally sensitive areas while providing a measure of surety to the city on its ability to address housing and job creation for the next 20–25 years.

Then in 2005, when the city again applied for the annexation of the Manabe/Bergstrom properties, local support, including that of Wetlands Watch occurred as a result of conditions that were made to restrict development for living wage “job development” ventures. The development of such a unique covenant resulted in the city and developers entering into an agreement that prohibited “big box” development and large auto dealerships, and focused on smaller-scale industrial development. To increase the future number of parties who could enforce the covenant, additional parties were asked to become signatories, including Wetlands Watch.

Also in 2005, the city began its next update to its general plan, referred to as *City of Watsonville General Plan Vista 2030*. Modifications achieved by Wetlands Watch included a requirement for a special use permit for projects within 100 feet of a wetland (a requirement for a Wetlands Management Policy to be developed as part of the specific plan process; a long-term financing mechanism for wetlands restoration as a part of the specific plan process) and the addition of several sensitive areas to the General Plan lists. Note: As of this report, the *General Plan Vista 2030* has been suspended by a lawsuit concerning expansion of city limits into the Buena Vista area and development in the flight path of the Watsonville Airport.

Today, Wetlands Watch, through their Planning and Conservation Committee, continues to monitor and advocate on behalf of the natural resources of the Watsonville Wetlands.

Research and Cooperative Planning

After its success in convincing the council to not proceed with the Lohr project as proposed, Wetlands Watch pressured Santa Cruz County and the City of Watsonville to develop a Master Plan for the Watsonville Slough System. With only county support, the request was put on hold until the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG) found funding for the first step toward this goal, a water quality study. The final *Water Resources Management Plan for the Watsonville Slough System*¹⁴ was approved in 1995 after 18 months of collaboration among many governmental and

nongovernmental organizations. The 32-member Technical Advisory Committee was chaired by Wetlands Watch’s Jim Van Houten.

At the conclusion of this study, Jim Van Houten, on behalf of Wetlands Watch, asked the city and county to continue meeting to plan for wetland protection and restoration through the development of a Master Plan document. The county was reluctant to provide resources to engage in this effort, as was the city. Instead, Wetlands Watch stepped up and began hosting quarterly meetings for interested government, nonprofit organizations and concerned citizens to continue discussions of their ongoing issues regarding the Watsonville Slough System. The informal group operated as the Watsonville Slough System Stewardship Committee. Through this process, the county did agree to provide in-house resources for continued water quality monitoring, as well as planning activities to further refine the findings and goals of the *Water Resources Management Plan*.

Numerous other Pajaro Valley community planning processes took place during this time period. Representatives of seven different agricultural, green, and social justice groups launched the Campaign to Save Pajaro Valley Farmlands and Wetlands, and produced the *1996 Pajaro Valley Alternative Plan* that demonstrated how to address the need for more housing and jobs without loss of farmland and wetlands.

Another planning study, the *Pajaro Valley Futures Study*, initiated by Wetlands Watch and funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation in 1999, was led by a committee of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, and Wetlands Watch. The study gathered information about vacant and underutilized properties in Watsonville and confirmed the ability of the city to meet its growth needs through infill of vacant and underutilized lands within and adjoining its borders. As a result of this effort, the City of Watsonville convened a visioning process for the Pajaro Valley through an effort that evolved into a nonprofit, Action Pajaro Valley. Subsequently, Action Pajaro Valley conducted a diverse community planning process, leading to passage of Measure U in November 2002—an urban growth boundary initiative—and dialogue related to Pajaro River flood control planning.

Still needed at this point was a resolution of the controversy over the site of the new high school, referred to as the New Millennium High School (now called Pajaro Valley High School). A select group

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representing the six stakeholders—the PVUSD, the city, the county, Wetlands Watch, CAFF, and the Sierra Club—were invited to participate in a negotiation process chaired by the presiding California Assembly Speaker pro-tem, Fred Keeley, in January of 2000. After about six weeks of intensive negotiations, a high school and open space preservation compromise was reached. The pivotal element of the talks and final agreement for Wetlands Watch and CAFF to drop their opposition to the school site were the legal and political enforceability provisions making the city’s westerly boundary a stable line of demarcation between any other urban uses and sensitive wetlands and agriculture in the coastal zone.

Within the memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by these entities (including passage by the city, county and Coastal Commission) were provisions: 1) Requiring that the City of Watsonville establish “a (1) one foot wide utility prohibition overlay district along the boundary of existing coastal zone areas A, B, and C across which the placement of waste water utility pipeline and potable water utility pipelines is prohibited;” 2) requiring “a super majority vote” by all three signers to the MOU of any provision to amend or revoke the growth enforcement measures in the MOU; 3) for removal by the City of the Tai property and other properties west of Highway 1, excluding the Green Farm property, from their existing status as a target of study for future annexations and development; and 4) dedication of public funds to pursue acquiring the Tai property for agricultural and conservation preservation.

As stated by Christine Johnson-Lyons of Wetlands Watch at the press conference held by Fred Keeley on the site on March 6, 2000, to announce the agreement, “We look back at the path that led us to today as an important lesson . . . the conflict is no longer children vs. red-legged frogs. Now the message is children, the environment, and the community.” The Coastal Commission approved the Local Coastal Plan amendments, setting the parameters for approving the high school on March 16, 2000. The final permit also added more than 100 conditions including the requirement for enhancement, long-term maintenance, and protection of the three Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHA) on the campus.¹⁵ Removing the need for litigation for lands west of Highway 1 was a pivotal point for Wetlands Watch, leading to improved cooperation with the city and PVUSD.

Lands in the coastal zone, once included in the Tai golf course and home site development proposal, were ultimately acquired by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz

County in 2009. Protected lands include 440 acres, now known as Watsonville Slough Farm, bounded by Lee Road, Harkins Slough Road, Watsonville Slough, and Harkins Slough, with Hansen’s Slough draining through the center of this property. The long-term protection of these lands would not have happened without Wetlands Watch’s early advocacy work.

Further Cooperative Studies, Initiatives and Land Use Planning Efforts Reflect the Political Changes and New Alliances

Watsonville Sloughs Watershed Resource Conservation and Enhancement Plan

Jim Van Houten, representing Wetlands Watch, was tireless in his push to continue the quarterly meetings of the Stewardship Committee, which fostered information exchange, and continued to generate collaborative partnerships. Ultimately, this led to the successful application by Santa Cruz County in 2000 for grant funding from the California Coastal Conservancy for the preparation of the *Watsonville Sloughs Watershed Resource Conservation and Enhancement Plan*. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency matched the state’s funding and the county provided staff to manage the project. A Steering Committee with members representative of the stakeholders in the watershed (including the City of Watsonville, County of Santa Cruz, Watsonville Wetlands Watch, Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District, Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency, State Coastal Conservancy, and US Environmental Protection Agency) held numerous meetings with growers and landowners in both the lower and upper watershed to discuss wetland and resource issues and potential mutually beneficial projects. The Master Plan that Wetlands Watch had sought for so many years was completed in 2003, and contained a list of over 42 conservation and enhancement projects. This plan was designed for use as a guide for the many agencies, organizations, and individual landowners to further the goals of conserving and restoring the diverse natural resources of the Watsonville Sloughs Watershed into the future.

Slough Trails Master Plan Moves Forward

Originally discussed during the planning process for the *Watsonville Sloughs Watershed Resource Conservation and Enhancement Plan*, the City of Watsonville wasted no time

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in completing their *Trails Master Plan, January 2002*, for recreational and interpretive trails near the heart of downtown at Struve, Watsonville, and Harkins Sloughs. Starting with an informal network of locally used footpaths, the city upgraded and expanded the system to include footpaths, bicycle paths, and point access for disabled users. Today, Wetlands Watch, through contracts with the city, is responsible for the maintenance and restoration of the approximately eight-mile trail system, most of which borders wetland areas throughout the city. Adult and student volunteers take part in trail system projects. Several well-attended volunteer days have been held on city trails on World Wetlands Day, building on the foundation begun by the city's nature center staff.

In May 2006, the City of Watsonville received an award from the California Association of Trails for the development of community nature trails that provide easy public access to this 800-acre freshwater wetland system. The trails also received recognition from the California Transportation Foundation, winning the 17th annual 2006 TRANNY award for Pedestrian Bicycle Project of the Year.

The City of Watsonville, Wetlands Watch, and partners are also working to expand the trails network to meet the goals of the city's *Urban Greening Plan* and *Trails Master Plan* that was adopted in 2012, which envisions a 33-mile trail network that uses the region's natural areas as greenbelts for transportation, recreation and conservation of wetlands and natural areas. Through the *Urban Greening Plan* project, Wetlands Watch staff and the city developed a vision and plan for restoration of the city's wetlands and improvement of open space, nature parks and natural infrastructure—all under development today.

A New Era of Education and Restoration

Under the terms of the MOU and Coastal Development Permit for the new high school, the Fitz Wetlands Educational Resource Center (WERC) was created as a cooperative venture shared by the City of Watsonville, the PVUSD, and Wetlands Watch on the Pajaro Valley High School site.

Because the PVUSD was mandated to have environmental education as a focus of the new high school, the district was able to apply for state funds totaling about \$500,000. Wetlands Watch, as the only nonprofit in the group, led the fundraising efforts. About \$350,000 was raised from foundations, businesses and local donors. The building was finished and

equipped as an environmental classroom and office space for Wetlands Watch in March 2006, and named the Fitz Wetland Education Resource Center (FitzWERC) after Patrick Fitz of Fitz Mushrooms, a major supporter of the organization and donor to the project. Later that year the greenhouse and outdoor classroom were constructed.

Wetlands Watch provides many learning opportunities for students, teachers and community members from its home at the FitzWERC, adjacent to several hundred acres of freshwater wetlands, grasslands, and natural habitat. The location of the FitzWERC offers a unique opportunity for groups and individuals to participate in hands-on laboratory and outdoor activities that foster an understanding of the local wetlands and a respect for nature as a whole. Through various K–12 programs, Wetlands Watch staff and dedicated docents and interns implement dynamic hands-on and inquiry-based environmental education with students of the Pajaro Valley. Students are given the space to cultivate an appreciation of local fauna and flora while developing real-world and academic and job-readiness skills.

Wetland Stewards

The Wetland Stewards Program, begun in 2006, is a hands-on experiential wetlands science program with a mentoring component, where high school students serve as teachers for middle and elementary school students throughout the PVUSD afterschool programs. The program offers a paid internship to 12 high school mentors each year, who develop their teaching and leadership skills by providing primary instruction to younger students about the flora and fauna of the wetlands, the importance of their conservation and ways that youth can become more involved with the restoration efforts. The goal of the program is to develop a community of youth that understands the importance of the slough system, feels comfortable outdoors and in nature, and is committed to taking action to conserve and restore the natural world.

Ongoing community education is a priority for the organization, including offering free evening lectures, tours of the wetlands and cultural history, and a variety of public events, festivals, and open houses.

Restoration

Early restoration work focused on two areas: slough clean-ups and habitat restoration on the California

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Department of Fish and Wildlife's (CDFW) West Struve Slough property, located along Lee Road and Harkins Slough Road. Through consultation and cooperation with the CDFW, the restoration committee began work on this property in 1992 to help expand wildlife habitat that had been degraded by agricultural activity just previous to state ownership. Habitat improvement activities performed by Wetlands Watch focused at the start on removal of the extensive population of invasive plant species (particularly poison hemlock), creation of brush piles on platforms to benefit the prey base, and installation of raptor poles.

Since its opening, the Fitz Wetlands Educational Resource Center has provided a base for administrative and logistical support for the restoration program. The heart of the program lies in the Ruth Hofmeister Memorial Greenhouse and the Shade House, where native plants are propagated prior to planting in various restoration projects. The native plant nursery grows over 120 different native plant species collected from the sloughs system watershed. Grant funding has played a major role in the restoration program, but additional resources have come from contractual arrangement with the PVUSD, the city, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, the Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District, and contracts with developers to support mitigation work for land development projects. Significant projects have included the completion of improvements on the Pajaro Valley High School Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas called for by the California Coastal Commission and outlined in the PVUSD's biological restoration plan, and the establishments of large scale wetland and native grassland and woodland restoration projects on public and private lands along Watsonville, Hanson and Struve Slough.

The Wetlands Watch restoration programs also work closely with growers throughout the slough system to establish wildlife corridors, water quality filtration



Jim Van Houten takes the lead on the building of the greenhouse at the Fitz Wetland Education Resource Center, February 2, 2006. (Photo courtesy of Watsonville Wetlands Watch)

strips and buffers, and to conduct soil erosion prevention and stabilization measures.

Summary

Since the late 1970s, when environmental advocacy efforts first were launched to protect the Watsonville wetlands and farmlands, significant steps forward have been made. For Wetlands Watch many of the early visions have become reality in many respects through actions, policy enactments and agencies who were once far apart in their view of the future of the wetland system. "The Watsonville Wetlands Watch looks forward to creating further opportunities for study, restoration and enjoyment of these resources for the benefit of wildlife, the community and future generations," as stated by Jonathan Pilch, Executive Director. "We've learned now that their value is crucial to our community health, our economy and to our future."¹⁶

For more information on ongoing educational, restoration and volunteer activities of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch, visit the website at www.watsonvillewetlandswatch.org.

For additional images related to this article (listed on p. 164), go online to the History Publications page of the MAH website, at: <https://santacruzmah.org/learn/history-publications/landscapes/>

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Notes

- Swanson Hydrology & Geomorphology, et al., *Watsonville Sloughs Watershed Resource Conservation & Enhancement Plan* (Prepared for County of Santa Cruz Planning Department, 2003).
- ² William J. Mitsch and James G. Gosselink, *Wetlands* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993).
- ³ Jerry Busch, *Watching the Watsonville Wetlands: An Armchair Guide to the Watsonville Slough System* (Watsonville Wetlands Watch, 2002).
- ⁴ Swanson Hydrology & Geomorphology, et al., *Watsonville Sloughs Watershed Resource Conservation & Enhancement Plan* (Prepared for County of Santa Cruz Planning Department, 2003).
- ⁵ David L. Suddjian, "Technical Appendix G: A Review of the Bird Resources of Watsonville Sloughs Watershed," in *Watsonville Sloughs Watershed Resource Conservation & Enhancement Plan* (Santa Cruz County California: from Swanson Hydrology & Geomorphology, et al., Prepared for County of Santa Cruz Planning Department, 2003).
- ⁶ T.E. Dahl, *Wetland Losses in the United States: 1780s to 1980s* (Washington D.C: W.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, 1990), 21.
- ⁷ Karl Frank Schwing, "Restoring converted wetlands: a case study in Watsonville, California" (1999). Master's Thesis. 1947, http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/1947.
- ⁸ Todd McFarren, personal interview by Christine Johnson-Lyons, March 8, 2018.
- ⁹ *Watsonville Register-Pajaronian* (four-part series), September 23 - 26, 1991.
- ¹⁰ Mike Wallace, Editorial, *Watsonville Register-Pajaronian*, September 26, 1991, 20.
- ¹¹ Karen Mora, personal interview by Christine Johnson-Lyons, March 9, 2018.
- ¹² City of Watsonville, *Watsonville 2005 General Plan* (City of Watsonville, 1994).
- ¹³ Jones & Stokes Associates, Final supplemental environmental impact report of Watsonville 2005 General Plan Update and Sphere of Influence amendment to include lands west of Lee Road (Prepared for City of Watsonville, 1996).
- ¹⁴ Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, *Water Resources Management Plan for Watsonville Slough System Santa Cruz County* (Prepared by Questa Engineering Corporation, Point Richmond, 1995).
- ¹⁵ California Coastal Commission, City of Watsonville Local Coastal Program, Major Amendment Number 1-99 Public Hearing Staff Report, 2000.
- ¹⁶ Jonathan Pilch, interview with Christine Johnson-Lyons, March 6, 2018.