

REFUGE MAY FIX 'SHOCKING' NEGLECT

By *The Record*

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Uncle Sam wants to extend a big wildlife refuge into San Joaquin County. That could mean getting something this county is shamefully short of: hiking trails.

Think about it. This county boasts four major rivers, the majority of the Delta, hundreds of miles of wide-open spaces ... and virtually no trail access to any of it.

"There are no places where people can go and walk more than a mile in the county, which is literally a crime against nature," said Sierra Club activist Eric Parfrey. "It is shocking."

Parfrey barely exaggerates. There are two places in the county where you can walk a mile or so: Caswell Memorial State Park, a nature squib on the south-county line, and Lodi Lake.

And, so? In a county with almost 1,400 square miles of land, that's a travesty.

Now the feds want to expand the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge, a 7,000-acre swath of riparian woodlands, wetlands and grasslands, from Stanislaus County to a point west of Manteca.

Nature trails are secondary to Uncle Sam's goal. The main idea is to further restore a flyway and habitat along the San Joaquin River. But secondary is better than nothing-dary.

Even an afterthought is better than the total absence of trails from the government agenda in San Joaquin County.

The recent history of thwarted trails around here reveals that San Joaquin County is a bizarre black hole for trails.

The city of Stockton planned a riverfront trail from the channel head all the way along water to Buckley Cove. Property owners nixed it.

The county's 1992 General Plan called for a healthy web of cross-county trails that would give the public wholesome access to nature and exercise.

The wonderful plan included a hike and bike trail from the county's eastern boundary along the Mokelumne River to Lodi Lake; a trail the full length of the Calaveras River from Calaveras County to Stockton; one along the Diverting Canal; one around Mossdale; one along the Stanislaus River from Ripon to Vernalis; not to mention several regional parks.

Twenty years later, precisely none of those trails or parks has been built.

Why? Consider the fate of another trail, the Great Delta Trail.

In 2006, a state law mandated the Delta Protection Commission to design and build a "continuous recreational corridor trail network" through all five Delta counties. The trails would link to Bay Area trails, too.

Sounds great, right? So the commission set about acquiring the land - or getting support for using abandoned railroad rights-of-way - and promptly ran into a buzzsaw of opposition from ranchers and farmers.

Commission director Mike Machado recalled a recent commission meeting.

"One local landowner in the Delta got up and said, 'I'm all in favor of the trail in the Delta, as long as all the bikers and hikers are required to wear respirators and hazmat suits so I don't have to worry about any repercussions.' "

Added Machado: "He was serious."

This property rights fundamentalism, which falls somewhere between NIMBY and xenophobia, is the major reason San Joaquin County is the place trails go to die.

Which is not to say there are no valid concerns. Yet other counties find solutions.

In Sonoma County, trails skirting farms close during certain ag operations. Signs are posted, "Trail closed between X and X date (or X and X hours) for agricultural activity."

But Sonoma is liberal, some will say. OK, Fresno County is building a San Joaquin River trail. If anything, Fresno is politically to the right of Stockton.

It's a mentality. Elsewhere, it's "Can do." Here, it's "Hell no." To everything.

San Joaquin farmers oppose the expansion of the refuge. They oppose regional parks. They oppose trails. They oppose the peripheral tunnels (I'm with them on that one). They'll oppose high-speed rail, you watch.

County supervisors utterly fail to balance the right to farm with the general public's right - its need, considering the obesity epidemic - to healthy outdoor recreation.

The supes have relinquished county planning to obstructive cranks who want the public to wear respirators and hazmat suits. None dare call it leadership.

Consequently, trails serving folks from the Sierra to the Bay all abruptly end at the San Joaquin County line. Did I mention the Mokelumne Coast to Crest Trail?

"A huge failure," Parfrey cringed. "A lot of the Bay Area people couldn't believe folks in San Joaquin County cannot become part of this. That they were so overtly hostile to what was considered such a great idea."

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