

Lower Walters Creek Restoration Project Underway

A small creek in the Morro Bay Watershed is receiving a major facelift this fall thanks to two new grants totaling \$340,000. Walters Creek, which flows into Chorro Creek near Highway 1 under Hollister Peak, is the focus of an impressive restoration project thanks to funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board in the amount of \$290,000 and from the Fish America Foundation in the amount of \$50,000.

The Wildlife Conservation Board award is from Prop 40 (California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Fund) funds. Fish America Foundation is a non-profit foundation that provides grants to enhance fish populations, restore fisheries habitat, improve water quality and advance fisheries research to improve sportfishing opportunities and success.

The Estuary Program has sought out and received a total of more than \$650,000 in grants for this

habitat restoration work. The list of funders also includes the Dept. of Fish and Game and NOAA (the National Oceanographic Atmospheric Administration).

The lower Walters Creek restoration project will create valuable freshwater wetlands along 1500 linear feet of creek, repair erosion hotspots, remove migration barriers for steelhead trout and improve water quality in this creek that eventually feeds into the Morro Bay Estuary. The creek and land around it are owned by the Dept. of Fish and Game and are currently being leased out as grazing land and as a gun range.

In 2004-5, the Estuary Program partnered with Cal Poly and the Dept. of Fish and Game to implement a similar restoration project on Upper Walters Creek. That project included electric fencing to control cattle access, off-stream water sources, water tanks, rock grade structures to control erosion of the channel bed,



One of five old failed culverts that will be removed from Walters Creek to reduce erosion, restore a natural stream channel, and improve fish passage.

installation of approximately 5,000 willow cuttings and approximately 2,500 native plants. Once completed, the lower Walters Creek project will create a high quality riparian corridor that connects the earlier restored Upper Walters Creek habitat with the next big restoration effort: the Chorro Creek Ecological Reserve property.

Chorro Valley Creeks Protected by Riparian Fencing

The Chorro Valley drains the northern two-thirds of the Morro Bay Estuary watershed. Cattle ranching is the single largest land use in the Chorro Valley, and in many areas cattle have open access to watershed creeks as their primary source of water. Unfortunately, this practice can contribute to water pollution and creek bank erosion, as well as have negative impacts on riparian vegetation. Today,

Chorro Valley ranchers and land owners are partnering with the Estuary Program to protect the watershed's creeks with riparian fencing that allows them to control cattle access.

As detailed in past *Turning the Tide* articles (including spring 2007), riparian fencing is an effective tool used to improve creek and estuary water quality on several

fronts including reduced bacterial contamination, nutrient over-enrichment, creek bank erosion and estuary sedimentation. The fencing not only prevents deposits of cow manure and urine in the creek, it also protects vegetation and therefore improves overall riparian habitat. In the last year, the Estuary Program and ranch landowners have helped protect over

continued on page 2

Chorro Valley Creek Riparian Fencing *...continued from page 1*

6 miles of watershed creeks through the Riparian Fencing Project.

Funding for this substantial effort has come from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation as part of a legal settlement over sewage spills into Chorro Creek from the California Men's Colony Treatment Plant. A total of just over \$525,000 has been designated to fund installation of riparian fencing along Chorro Creek and its tributaries. The San Luis Coastal Resource Conservation District has been a key partner in these efforts, helping to design and to fund the 'off-creek' water systems that ranches need in order to pull their cattle from the creeks.

As of fall 2007, more than 14,000 feet of fencing has been installed on private ranch lands including a large portion of San Bernardo Creek and a tributary draining into San Luisito Creek. Both creeks are in the western portion of the Chorro Valley. Plans

are also underway to fence an additional two miles of a near-by creek.

The Estuary Program has also partnered with two large public land owners in the Chorro Valley: Cal Poly and Camp SLO.

Cal Poly owns the upper portion of Walters Creek as part of their 743-acre Walters Ranch. In the 1990's Walters Creek was a control site for the Paired Watershed Study to research the effects of different grazing management techniques on creek water quality.

Since the study concluded, Cal Poly has partnered with the Estuary Program and the Dept. of Fish and Game to implement a fencing and restoration project on upper Walters Creek. This past year, all remaining portions of the creek used as grazing land were fenced.



Gates allow ranchers the option of using creek buffer areas for brief periods of grazing.

The Integrated Training and Management Department of Camp SLO is leading the effort to fence one of the last stretches of Chorro Creek open to cattle, as well as upper Pennington Creek. This effort will result in three miles of riparian fencing on the base.

A total of more than 30,000 feet of fencing will be in place on Cal Poly and Camp SLO land by the end of the year.

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New Sediment Lab Will Help Track Creek Erosion Rates

A new partnership between Cuesta College and the Estuary Program will bring a state of the art sediment lab to the Morro Bay Watershed and Cuesta College this winter.

The new lab was made possible by the donation of space on the Cuesta Campus and equipment purchased with grant funding awarded to the Estuary Program's Volunteer Monitoring Program.

The new sediment lab will facilitate expanded monitoring efforts and detailed measurements of suspended sediment in Chorro and Los Osos Creeks during rain storm events.

Data obtained from these efforts will help characterize erosion rates in the Morro Bay watershed and the effects on the Estuary downstream. The data will also assist in evaluating the effectiveness of the many restoration efforts implemented to reduce upstream erosion.

The sediment lab will open in January 2008 in the newly renovated physical sciences center in Building 2100. It will be operated by the Estuary Program's Volunteer Monitoring Program staff and will include Cuesta student participation as well as ongoing community volunteer involvement.

Los Osos Sewer Assessment Vote: Estuary Program's Message to the Community

Bringing improved wastewater treatment to Los Osos is an important project for the health of the estuary and a high priority in our Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) for Morro Bay. Since our inception, the Estuary Program has been working to help where we can on this challenging project, while balancing the potential for this single issue to distract us from the many other efforts needed to protect and restore the bay.

The National Estuary status of the bay is one of the stronger arguments for federal funding support for this project, and the Estuary Program will continue to advocate for support in Washington D.C. and Sacramento.

In 2005 the Estuary Program made the single largest donation (\$100,000) to the Los Osos Low Income Assistance Fund to help residents with the project costs. More recently Estuary Program Director Dan Berman has been serving on the County's Technical Advisory Committee for the project, and has penned the following open letter to the community to provide the Estuary Program's perspective on the current decision facing property owners.

Property owners in Los Osos are facing a critical decision in the struggle to find a long overdue wastewater solution for Los Osos. This is an important issue for the health of the Morro Bay Estuary as well as the community of Los Osos. The Estuary Program urges the community to educate themselves on the issues and to vote. To that end,

here are some observations from the Estuary Program perspective:

The ongoing pollution of the groundwater and the estuary from thousands of densely spaced septic systems in Los Osos is well documented and must be resolved.

The substantial cost of solving this problem is largely the result of 30 years of delay, and it will have to be faced soon regardless of the outcome of this vote.

The Proposition 218 vote is not just about funding a solution; it will also determine who leads the project forward. A yes vote keeps the project in the County's hands with a firm financial commitment from the community. A no vote returns responsibility for the project to the Los Osos CSD and puts off the question of how to fund the project.

The County has a competent and professional Project Team in place and has accomplished substantial technical and financial work as well as community outreach and involvement in the short time since it took over this effort in January 2007.

The LOCSO is in bankruptcy proceedings and their capacity to implement a massive public works project is a key question, as a 'no' vote hands them responsibility for the project.

Many important decisions about a County-led effort will only be made after a successful 218 vote. This is the County's approach to protect county-wide taxpayers from

a situation where the community walks away from a project at the last minute (circa 1997 and 2005). The required environmental review and permitting process will provide important information and opportunities for input and comment. The County has committed to a project selection process that continues to engage the community in selecting the project details.

The Estuary Program urges the community of Los Osos to engage in this important community decision, seek out the answers to their questions, and to vote with the health of the estuary in mind.

Teachers Invited to Free Science Workshop

The Estuary is a wonderful example of science in action including the water cycle, soil erosion, food webs and the work of decomposers. The Estuary Program would like to invite 4th and 5th grade teachers to a free science workshop offering state standard compatible science lesson plans and materials.

The workshop will be held after school on Friday, November 2nd and on Saturday, November 3rd. For more information call (805)772-3834 or visit www.mbnep.org.

Volunteers Needed for Creek Water Quality Monitoring

The Morro Bay Volunteer Monitoring Program needs new volunteers! As a volunteer, your efforts will increase the understanding of threats to the health of the estuary and the impacts of measures taken to address those threats. The program is currently seeking community volunteers for its water quality and bacteria monitoring efforts this fall.

Water quality monitors conduct monthly monitoring at a variety of beautiful creek sites throughout the Morro Bay watershed. Volunteers work in teams and are trained to use various meters and test kits to gather valuable data on water quality conditions on local creeks. Each monitoring event requires approximately two hours of time

and a minimum commitment of approximately six months.

Also needed are volunteers for the program's bacteria monitoring effort. Volunteers collect water samples from local creeks and return with them to a lab to conduct analysis for common bacteria indicators. Samples are incubated and volunteers return to the lab the following day to interpret the results. The monitoring requires approximately two hours and a minimum commitment of approximately six months.

For more information go to www.mbnep.org and click on the volunteer link or call program staff members Ann Kitajima and Annie Gillespie at (805) 772-3834.



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The Morro Bay National Estuary Program is a local non-profit working to protect, preserve and restore the Morro Bay estuary and its watershed. The MBNEP is funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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