

**May 21, 2005**

**SR to Give \$450,000 to Battle Ludwigia**

**City to pay for about a third of cost of program to fight water weed, mosquitoes**

**By Mike McCoy, Press Democrat**

The war chest is now full to fight Ludwigia, the fast-growing water weed that is choking off life in the Laguna de Santa Rosa and threatens to provide safe haven for mosquitoes carrying the West Nile virus.

Santa Rosa's Board of Public Utilities agreed Thursday to put up \$450,000 over a three-year period to combat the quickly spreading menace.

“We use the Russian River and the Laguna to get our drinking water and to get rid of our wastewater. We should protect them,” said board member Carol Dean.

The battle is being spearheaded by the Laguna Foundation, a Sebastopol nonprofit group working to protect the 14-mile waterway and 22,000 acres of surrounding wetlands that stretch from Cotati to the Russian River.

On July 1, a group of 15 state agencies and nonprofit groups are planning to unleash a two-pronged attack on Ludwigia, spraying the weed-infested areas along the Laguna with herbicide and using tractors to remove it once it's dead.

The three-year program will cost about \$1.5 million.

The Laguna Foundation has already received \$500,000 commitments from the Sonoma County Water Agency and the State Water Conservation Board and another \$100,000 from the Marin/Sonoma Mosquito and Vector Control District.

Santa Rosa's utility board reversed a decision earlier this year to deny funding and voted unanimously Thursday to put up \$150,000 annually over the next three years to fight Ludwigia. The board represents the four cities that surround the Laguna -- itself, Rohnert Park, Cotati and Sebastopol.

Its earlier decision to stay out of the fight was largely based on objections by Sebastopol, said Dan Carlson, Santa Rosa's deputy director of subregional operations.

Sebastopol officials contended that no direct scientific connection had been made linking the weed's fast-paced growth in the Laguna to wastewater discharges from Santa Rosa's sewage treatment plant, Carlson said.

Sebastopol officials also have steadfastly opposed the use of herbicides to control Ludwigia.

An estimated 10,000 tons of the non-native weed is carpeting major portions of the Laguna, both upstream and downstream of the regional sewage treatment plant.

The weed, which can double in size every 15 to 90 days during its summer growing season, is crowding out native plants and providing a safe haven for mosquitoes from predators and insecticides. In addition, biologists are concerned that Ludwigia is threatening to block the passage of spawning fish.

Despite the lack of proof that wastewater could be contributing to Ludwigia's growth, Santa Rosa's board agreed to reverse its position at the behest of the foundation.

Anna Sears, the foundation's research director, said the spread of Ludwigia could choke off waterways and holding ponds critical to the city's wastewater disposal program. She warned it could destroy sensitive wetlands built by the city and cause flooding to the city's regional sewage treatment plant.

In addition, she said West Nile virus-carrying mosquitoes harbored by the weed could threaten the health of city workers who operate the regional sewage treatment system near the Laguna.

While sensitive to Sebastopol's concerns, board members quickly agreed to change its vote.

“The bottom line is what is the right thing to do. This affects all of us,” board member Mike Downey said.