

Stone Lakes refuge among wetlands being assessed nationwide

Anne Gonzales, Sacramento Bee, 6-3-11

A national wildlife refuge near Elk Grove is part of a far-reaching effort to assess water and soil conditions in some of the nation's most vulnerable ecosystems.

Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is among the more than 1,000 areas being studied that could help shape protection efforts of wetlands and aquatic resources.

Up to 95 percent of the nation's wetlands – also known as streamside riparian habitats – have been wiped out or modified, said Jonathan Bishop, chief deputy director of the State Water Resources Control Board, one of the partners of the survey.

Nutrient-rich and easy-to-till wetlands were historically seen as good farmland, but many of the areas have been damaged or transformed by development.

The National Wetlands Condition Assessment will "allow us to compare data and increase the scope of our monitoring," Bishop said.

The Stone Lakes wetlands sampling is one of 43 California sites in the study. A report from the study is expected in 2013.

Bishop said the Stone Lakes refuge was originally a wetlands area that was drained and used for farming before being returned to its natural state and placed under federal protection in 1992.

Beatrix Treiterer, assistant manager of Stone Lakes, said the wetlands portion of the refuge has been restored, but replacing vegetation is ongoing.

The survey coincides with draft rules that will outline which waters are subject to protection under the Clean Water Act, the 40-year-old cornerstone of federal wetlands protection.

Wetlands are credited with ensuring Americans have clean and healthy waters, said Alexis Strauss, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's water division director for the Pacific Southwest.

The new rules are part of President Barack Obama's national clean water framework, incorporating recent Supreme Court decisions for outlining what types of water could be subject to protection.

"Wetlands filter pollution, and protect communities from flooding while providing habitat for fish, fowl and flora," said Strauss. "These are being placed at risk and modified by our patterns of habitation and food production."

Strauss said the survey results will be used as a base line to evaluate changes in wetlands soil and water, and to make decisions about where the EPA invests money and staff time in the future.

EPA biologist Paul Jones said the samples will test water in wetlands for levels of pH, ammonia, nitrogen, phosphorous, salts and chlorophyll. The study also will identify algae species, including toxic varieties.

Soil samples will measure enzymes, density and some pesticide levels.

The biologists also are assessing vegetation in the area, including counting plants and identifying species.