

FOCUS PROGRAM: Priority Conservation Area Designation Nomination Form

Enter information in the spaces provided. E-mail this completed nomination form and attachments requested as part of this form to FOCUS@abag.ca.gov by **August 17, 2007**. If e-mailing is not possible, a hard copy of materials can be mailed to Jackie Guzman, Association of Bay Area Governments, P.O. Box 2050, Oakland, CA 94604-2050.

PART 1: AREA INFORMATION

Area Name	San Geronimo Valley headwaters of the Lagunitas Watershed and shore of Tomales Bay
Area Location (city, town, county)	San Geronimo Valley and shore of Tomales Bay, west Marin County
Total Acreage	9 square-miles headwaters (out of a total 103 square mile watershed)

Attach a map showing the proposed area boundaries and location. Include other relevant information, such as topography or an aerial photograph, to show the context for protection of this area.

PART 2: NOMINEE CONTACT INFORMATION

Lead Nominating Agency/Organization	Salmon Protection And Watershed Network
Contact Person	Todd Steiner
Address	PO Box 400, Forest Knolls, CA 94933
Phone Number(s)	415 488 0370 ext. 103
E-mail address	tsteiner@SpawnUSA.org
Partnering Agency(ies)/Organization(s)	Point Reyes National Seashore (National Park Service)

Part 3: See next 3 pages.

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PART 3: AREA CRITERIA

A. Level of Consensus

The San Geronimo Valley community has long been involved in protecting the Lagunitas Creek Watershed population of coho salmon, which is partly the reason why the species still occurs here, even as this endangered species has been extirpated from 90-95% of other streams in the State. Community members and organizations have worked together and provided tens-of-thousands of dollars in pro bono assistance to improve salmon habitat and protect the ecological function of the watershed as a whole. This is reflected in San Geronimo Valley Plan, the official planning document written by the community and approved by the Marin Board of Supervisors that recognizes the importance of protection and recovery of coho salmon and creek ecosystems throughout the document.

One-third of the residents in the San Geronimo Valley are members of a locally-based organization called SPAWN (Salmon Protection And Watershed Network), founded in 1997. These members provide both financial support and thousands of volunteer hours annually to various monitoring and restoration projects including a native plant nursery that grows thousands of plants collected from local genetic seeds and cuttings, environmental education activities for students and adults on how to live fish-friendly lives, a juvenile salmon rescue and relocation program (17,000 fish saved to date), conservation monitoring of spawning and smolt populations, and watershed-wide water quality monitoring. SPAWN just recently launched a nascent land acquisition program to identify, purchase and/or create conservation easements on parcels adjacent to salmon creeks and riparian habitat.

Agencies and organizations have been actively cooperating in restoration and monitoring efforts to improve salmonid habitat for over 25 years. A Technical Advisory Committee composed of government agencies, non-profits and academics meet regularly to advise the Marin Municipal Water District's (MMWD) fish restoration program, the result of a State Water Board order. The Tomales Bay Watershed Council (which includes the Lagunitas Watershed), where thirty cooperating organizations in the Watershed come together to coordinate and collaborate in watershed monitoring and restoration activities, recently published an Integrated Coastal Watershed Management Plan.

The County of Marin (CoM) has begun a program to repair County culverts, which are an obstacle to migration, and Marin County Open Space District and fire department are working cooperatively to reduce sedimentation on County-maintained fire roads, as has CA State (CPS) and National Parks (NPS). Cooperative monitoring of salmon populations includes MMWD, NPS, and SPAWN. The Marin Resource Conservation District, Trout Unlimited, Wilderness Way, San Geronimo Valley Planning Group, Tomales Bay Association and others are also actively involved in restoration efforts. SPAWN and the Tomales Bay Watershed Council have been monitoring water quality. The CA Fish & Game, State Water Board, National Marine Fisheries Service and private foundations are all also helping fund these efforts.

These activities have been valued minimally at \$12,000,000 over the past 10 years, most of it coming from public funding sources. This does not include an approximately \$5,000,000 current NPS wetlands restoration project at the confluence of Lagunitas Creek and Tomales Bay.

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B. Regional Significance

The Lagunitas Creek Watershed (LWC) at 103 square-miles is the largest watershed in Marin County and the largest drainage area into Tomales Bay. It originates on the northern slopes of Mount Tamalpais and flows north approximately 25 miles through Tomales Bay to the Pacific Ocean. The primary stream is Lagunitas Creek, which is fed mainly by San Geronimo Creek and its tributaries in the San Geronimo Valley sub-Watershed, the most highly threatened part of the watershed.

The LCW and Tomales Bay is a region of unsurpassed beauty and environmental diversity that has long been recognized as a special place deserving a high level of protection by citizens and local, state and federal agencies. The watershed supports abundant aquatic and terrestrial habitat and multiple listed species, including coho salmon, steelhead, California freshwater shrimp, and California red-legged frog, with Lagunitas Creek being of statewide significance for coho salmon. Lagunitas Creek watershed has been the focus of salmonid restoration for 25 years.

The region's ecological significance is reflected in the numerous designations and protections afforded to the area. Most of the bay and its shoreline were included in the National Park System through the creation of the Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS) in 1962 and Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) in 1972. The PRNS is one of only ten national seashores in the United States and the only one on the west coast. In 1979 the California Coastal Commission (CCC) adopted a resolution designating Tomales Bay as a "Special Resource Area." This designation covers "the coastal waters and immediately adjacent uplands of Tomales Bay" and was made "to denote the Commission's commitment to the protection, enhancement, and where feasible, restoration of the unique and important natural resources of this area." The bay is a state designated ecological reserve, and is also part of the Golden Gate Biosphere Reserve. In 2002, UNESCO included Tomales Bay as a "Wetland of International Importance" under an international treaty called the RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands. The adjacent Gulf of Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GFNMS) was established in 1981 for protection of offshore and marine resources.

While many of familiar with Lagunitas Creek and Tomales Bay, very little attention has been given to headwater regions of the San Geronimo Valley, where impacts from human urban development are most severe and many of those impacts (sediment, nutrients, pathogens, alien species, etc.) are carried downstream where they impact National and State parklands.

A large part of the 103 square-mile Lagunitas Watershed is already owned by public agencies (MMWD, NPS, CPS, CoM), yet possibly the most important spawning and rearing habitat for endangered coho salmon and steelhead trout, occurring in the 9 square-mile undammed San Geronimo Valley, is currently: (1) in private hands, and (2) has or is likely to have residential development on it in the future.

As indicator species, we strongly believe coho salmon in particular, are not likely to survive full build-out of the hundreds of residential parcels open to development in the headwaters region. We believe a program to purchase and upgrade the ecological functions of sensitive creekside parcels as well as implement conservation easements on currently developed creekside parcels, a well-recognized extremely important tool in the conservation "toolbox" is missing from the current strategies to protect the Lagunitas Creek Watershed and the State's most important wild coho population.

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C. Urgency

The San Geronimo Valley located in unincorporated west Marin County is the last large un-dammed headwaters of the Lagunitas Watershed (Kent Lake and Nicasio Reservoir eliminated the other two major headwaters areas in the last century). These 9 square-miles of habitat represents less than 9% of the total 102 square-miles of the entire Lagunitas Watershed, but provides coho spawning habitat for approximately 50% of the population¹ and upwards of one-third of the coho juvenile rearing habitat.

The semi-rural San Geronimo Valley has approximately 3,500 residents living on 1,500 parcels. Another approximately 900 parcels have remained undeveloped, yet face increasing pressure as previous obstacles to development such as the inability to use traditional septic systems have been erased by new technology such as “mound” septic systems. Furthermore, the increased value of land has resulted in new landowners who are building new larger and larger houses (many with multiple car garages) or replacing the current older modest homes, many of which were originally built as part-time summer cabins. This “gentrification” of the character of the Valley threatens to significantly increase destruction of riparian habitat, increase impervious surfaces and runoff that cause bank failures, sedimentation and other associated pollution of the stream systems and threaten the survival and recovery of coho salmon.

The State lists Lagunitas Creek as impaired for sediment, pathogens and nutrients. The San Geronimo Valley is a major source of sediment that impairs the Lagunitas Creek Watershed salmonid population caused by human development and natural conditions, and residential development is also contributing pathogens and nutrients from septic systems and application of fertilizers to the creek systems.

The coho salmon in these areas are listed as "Endangered" by the State of California and were up-listed from "threatened" to "endangered" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act in 2005. Estimates of the annual coho and steelhead population in the watershed were 6,000 about sixty years ago. Today the annual population of coho is less than 500 spawning fish, down to 5-10% of their historic numbers. Through greatly reduced, the Lagunitas Watershed population represents 10- 20% of all wild California coho surviving today in Central California.

While the above (*A. Level of Consensus*) section shows that there is already a high level of collaboration between agencies, the community and NGOs on research and monitoring, and various restoration activities to reduce past negative impacts to critical salmonid habitat, what is missing is a strong land acquisition program to prevent new assaults to as-yet undeveloped parcels in the headwater regions. Ultimately, this effort should also include land acquisition and conservation easements in downstream reaches of Lagunitas Creek and privately owned parcels along the shores of Tomales Bay.

SPAWN has just begun to bring a similar collaboration together, initially to support the purchase of four parcels located along stream habitats and an adjacent parcel to house a “demonstration center” to model “salmon-friendly” lifestyles to Valley residents, but planning to morph this effort into a larger endeavor in the near future. The Committee working on this includes: California Assembly member, Jared Huffman, Point Reyes National Seashore Superintendent, Don Neubacher; California Academy of Sciences, John McCosker; Switzer Foundation Board member, Mark Switzer; Sandler Family Supporting Foundation Board member Jim Sandler; and several other prominent local community members. As the project develops, we expect that many of the agencies and NGOs previously mentioned will be willing partners in this conservation activity

¹ Not including Olema Creek Watershed)