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New Report Released to Inform Flood Control and Groundwater Recharge in the Petaluma River Watershed

SANTA ROSA, CA (April 10, 2018) – Our watersheds are a mosaic of land uses sculpted by the geography in which we reside. However, what we see today is not how these landscapes have always looked and functioned, and understanding their past can help communities plan and evolve for years to come. A collaboration between the San Francisco Estuary Institute (SFEI) and the Sonoma Resource Conservation District (RCD) exemplifies this concept in the newly released *Petaluma Valley Historical Hydrology and Ecology Study*.

In 2015, the Sonoma RCD was awarded a grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency to develop a historical watershed study of the Petaluma River. The study examines the historical hydrology and ecology of the Petaluma River watershed prior to major Euro-American modification, and analyzes landscape changes over the past two centuries. Synthesizing information from hundreds of archival documents, the research reconstructs the historical form and function of wetland, riparian, and aquatic habitats and stream channels throughout the watershed, providing insights into habitat extent and distribution, streamflow and sediment dynamics, vegetation composition, wildlife support, and landscape change. Findings from this research will help in setting restoration targets and prioritizing multi-benefit opportunities to enhance wildlife habitat and flood protection, increase groundwater recharge, and improve sediment management.

“The Petaluma River watershed is a unique area of our County,” says Valerie Quinto, Executive Director of the Sonoma RCD. “It is home to diverse and productive agriculture, a river that serves as the heart of the community, and the largest remaining ancient tidal marsh in the bay area. But it is also regularly impacted by severe flooding, major sediment transport issues, and its main groundwater basin has been listed by the Department of Water Resources as a basin requiring sustainable groundwater management efforts. Studying the history of the watershed will help us to identify opportunities to alleviate its greatest challenges.”

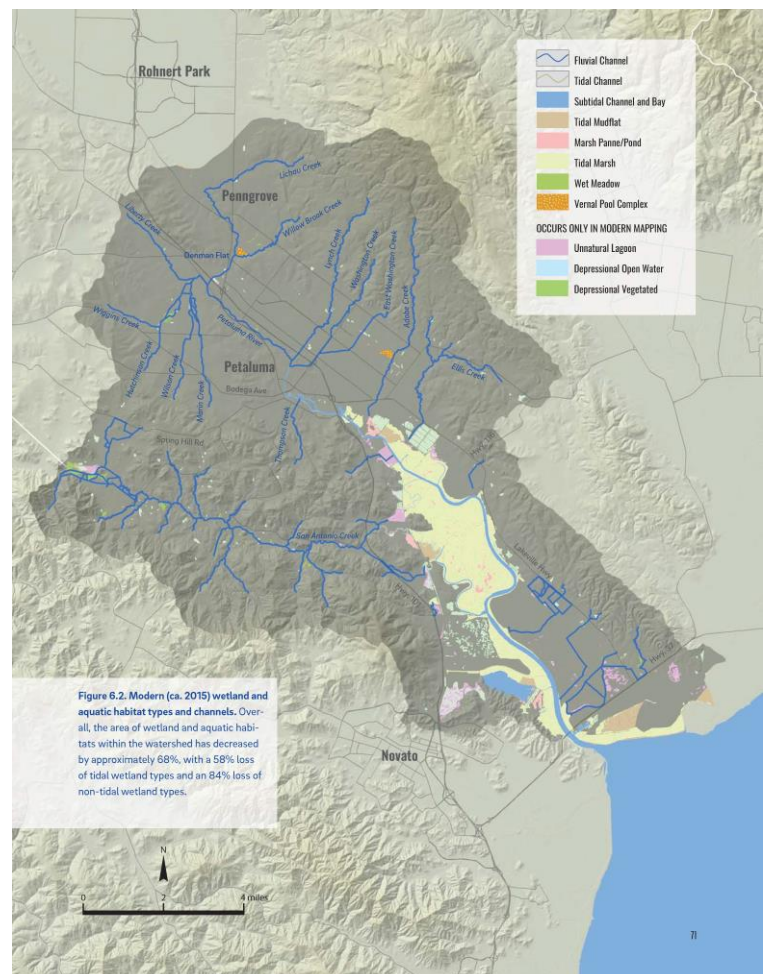
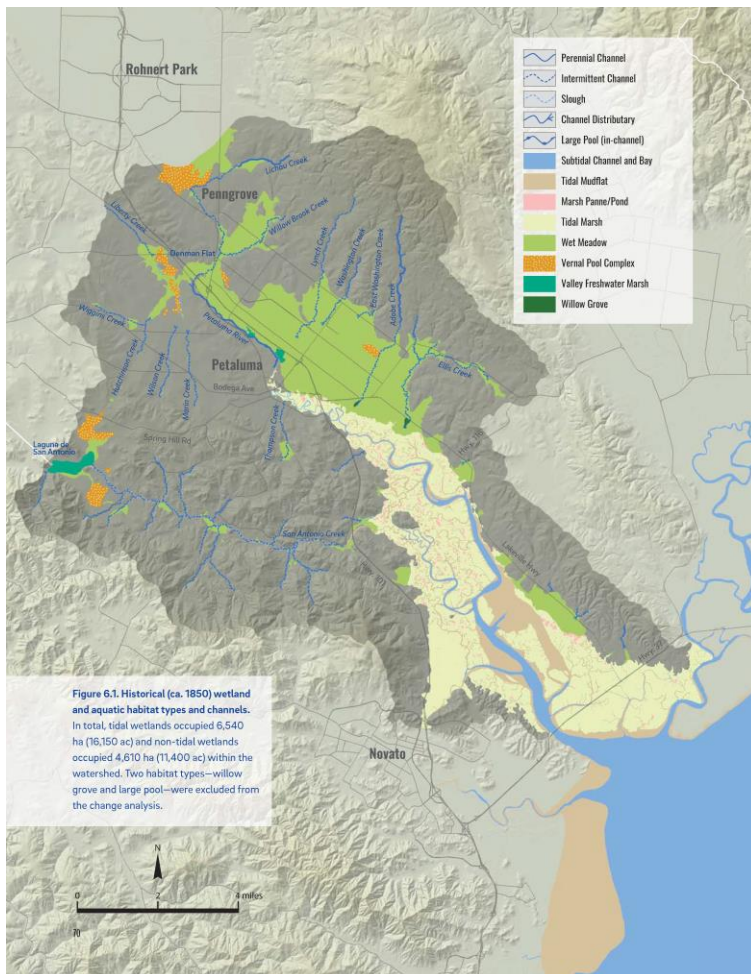
The research, data collection, and analysis was led by SFEI, with the support and guidance of a technical advisory committee (TAC) comprised of 18 local historians, scientists, and watershed stewards. TAC members contributed to the development of project objectives, methodology, analysis, interpretation and reporting. “The Petaluma Valley community and resource leaders want to restore and improve the health of the Petaluma River,” said report co-author Sean Baumgarten. “This study identifies options for how and where to restore habitats in the

valley to enhance natural functions provided by the river and its wetlands and tributaries. SFEI has enjoyed partnering with the RCD and local experts to create this new foundation for watershed preservation.”

Comparing historical and contemporary mapping has shown that the watershed has undergone considerable habitat loss over the last 150 years, including vital wetlands which could provide flood protection and help mitigate against a changing climate. The report states, “These profound landscape changes have affected ecosystem functions and decreased the overall ecosystem services the watershed once provided. Despite these changes the large amount of relatively undeveloped land within the watershed also provides extensive opportunities to restore functioning and interconnected wetland habitats.”

It is the goal of this report to guide future decisions in the watershed, not change the past or recreate a watershed that once was. To complement this report a feasibility analysis will be conducted to identify the most viable opportunities for collaborative, multi-benefit restoration and enhancement projects. Given the predominantly private land ownership throughout the watershed, land use and landowner interest will be key factors in the feasibility of any project. The Sonoma RCD will complete the feasibility analysis in late spring 2018.

PRESS INVITATION: SFEI and SRCD are hosting an informational community meeting on Tuesday, April 17th from 6:00 – 8:00 pm at the Petaluma Community Center at Lucchesi Park, 320 North McDowell Blvd, Petaluma. More information and link to RSVP’s at <http://sonomarcd.org/get-involved/>



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