

Testimony before North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, May 17, 2006

My name is Sue Leskiw. I'm here today as a past board member of both FOAM (Friends of the Arcata Marsh) and Redwood Region Audubon, two nonprofit groups with close ties to the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary. I'd like to tell you about values the Marsh system brings to Arcata beyond wastewater treatment.

Every year when I write a "Statistics" article for FOAM's quarterly newsletter, it includes the same statement: "Visitors signing the Interpretive Center logbook hailed from all 50 states, plus between 10 and 15 foreign countries." The Arcata Marsh contributes to Humboldt County's prestige as an ecotourism destination. It has been written about in Smithsonian, Audubon, National Geographic, even United Airlines in-flight magazine.

Visitors to the Interpretive Center increased from 6,000 in 1995 to over 19,000 in 2005 – and that number severely underestimates usage of the Marsh, since it tallies only those who come into the building.

Through special request tours, several thousand people a year -- many of them school children, but also groups such as Rotary, Easter Seals, ElderHostel, the Bank Heritage Club – are educated about the Marsh by FOAM docents and city staff. Elementary-age students spend weeks each summer participating in the Natural History Museum's Marsh Explorers Program.

While birds are often the focus of Marsh tours, other walks have emphasized history, ecology, plants, butterflies, oysters, mudflats, and even the full moon! One Saturday per month, FOAM sponsors a wastewater treatment plant tour. Audubon has led a weekly bird walk at the Marsh since March 6, 1982!

The Arcata Marsh is not only a sanctuary for wildlife – over 270 species of birds have been sighted in its ponds, marshes, mudflats, and uplands -- but for people as well. Its 4.5 miles of trails were voted the Best Place to Walk or Jog in a contest sponsored by the Times-Standard newspaper.

The Arcata Marsh serves as a model for alternative wastewater treatment methods. Engineers from around the world can come see a marsh process in action and possibly implement a similar system where they live. One speaker at the 20th anniversary celebration of Arcata's wastewater victory, held in 1999, claimed that 800 low-tech projects have been implemented in the US and the world based on the Arcata Marsh model.

Just yesterday, I received an e-mail from an employee with the City of Willits, which is in the design/construction stages for a natural wastewater treatment system like Arcata's. She wrote: I am in the process of submitting a grant for Prop 50 funding. Part of this grant addresses "Other expected benefits" to the community. Please contact me.

The Arcata Marsh is a favorite research location for Humboldt State University students. Over the past two years, FOAM has funded research grant awards that supported five student projects associated with the Marsh.

The Arcata Marsh serves as an inspiration to artists, photographers, and poets. Many of their creations are featured in a monthly exhibition sponsored by FOAM.

The Arcata Marsh was the first wetland that the Coastal Conservancy restored. The Arcata Marsh's overlay of multiple uses serves as a shining example of what a community can do with a former plywood mill and landfill: wastewater treatment, wildlife sanctuary, park.

The Arcata Marsh has many social and environmental benefits and, to quote HSU professor Bob Gearheart, "gives a soft edge to the urban experience." The Arcata Marsh is a part of the community that brings joy, a place for fish and birds, for kids to run around and wonder.

Thank you for letting me share these values of what we call "The Magic Marsh" with you today.