Ranching in jeopardy says former National Park Service superintendent

By Shelli Ferguson

The worst fears of local ranchers and agricultural advocates were confirmed very early in a presentation given by former National Park Service Superintendent for the Point Reyes National Seashore, Tim Semticka, last Thursday night at the West Marin School.

"If you're in the ranching business in the Point Reyes National Seashore, your business is in jeopardy," Semticka said.

Semticka received his bachelor's degree from Colorado State University and spent his entire career with the US Forest Service and the National Park Service. But he said he has seen a change in the way things were done in the Park Service during his 35-year career, which took him to the Grand Tetons, Yosemite and Santa Rosa Island.

"The culture of the National Park Service has changed," Semticka said. "I really deplore the lack of honesty on Santa Rosa Island, and with the "Tandy's Oyster Ranch." At 53,492 acres, Santa Rosa is the second largest of the five islands constituting the Channel Islands National Park. The island's history has many similarities with the history of the Point Reyes. It has long been seen in racing, cattle and farming, and also has a large population of elk, deer and antelope.

Semticka said, "If you were to go out there, you would see many beautiful, intact oyster beds, but you're not going to find any oysters. You're going to find a lot of debris."

Purchased in 1960 by the Viel and Vieck families for the sum of $1 million, it was sold to the Park Service in 1987 for $20.5 million, with a breed deed that extended for 25 years. The story of the transfer of ownership did not have a happy ending and went quite awfully.

"It started out good, went bad and then went very, very ugly," Semticka told the audience.

Russ and Al Viel represented the two families in the sale and were the most active in running the ranching and hunting operations on the island. The brothers had successfully managed the operations, which included cattle grazing and a deer, elk and pig hunting business for which they had imported animals. The cattle operation was limited to "tethered" cattle brought to the island in January and kept in pens for the remainder of the year.

The trouble began for the families with a change of Park leadership in 1989 and an influx of approximately $900,000 in funding for resource management staff. Soon the ranching operation was the target of a variety of ecological studies. Species were identified and the ranching operation was cited as detrimental to the survival of the species.

The ranching operations could not be conclusively blamed by any of the Park Service staff, Semticka said. So the NPS sought the help of other agencies, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Monitoring Quality Board. Over time the demands for management actions by the ranchers made it impossible for the family to continue ranching.

"We ran them out of business with well-intentioned good intentions," Semticka said. "It's not right, and it's not right here in Point Reyes." During a question and answer period following his lecture Semticka recommended using political capital to further the campaign at some point in the future. He also stressed the importance of continuing to participate in the NPS process and providing written documentation of all arguments against their proposed actions.

"The Park Service is starting to put ranching and farming into the conversation," Semticka said. "They are starting to build an administrative record in preparation for litigation.

The event was held and coordinated by a letter from the Point Reyes Seashore Ranchers Association written to the Park Superintendent that outlined the local residents' concerns. The letter, which Semticka called "clear and well written," can be found online at: www.nps.gov/ver/parkmgmt/amplanning_nash_cav_scoping_comments.ht m (Correspondence 42076).

Another discussion of the issue is scheduled for Tuesday, November 11, from 7-8:30 pm at the West Marin School Gymnasium. Speakers will include Nina Viel, Chief Executive Officer of the California Range Land Trust, Will Woolley, member of the Viel family and Dewey Livesay, Point Reyes National Seashore historian.

Marin Ranching Conservation District launches new program to improve local creeks

The nearly 60 years of helping Marin County ranchers and farmers with creek restorations and other conservation projects, the Marin Resource Conservation District will soon be providing services to another group: people with homes and businesses along our creeks.

Meet Sarah Phillips, the RCD's Urban Streams Coordinator, who is leading this new initiative to assist landowners who are near sensitive streams and creeks. With ambitious goals, Phillips will be working with all stakeholders — helping people keep the challenges of protecting and improving their homes and properties, while also conserving and enhancing the quality of the nearby creeks and complying with the complex, regulatory requirements.

Phillips says that her first priority will be to get to know everyone involved. "I'll be attending homeowner gatherings and meetings with the various advocacy groups, and I'm already meeting with the County and all the agencies. I want to be a real resource in providing solutions that everyone can live with, as well as overseeing and improving our local creeks and the wildlife that depends on them.

Phillips comes to the job with plenty of experience. Since 2011 she has had a similar role for the South Yuba River watershed, where she helped resolve conflicting demands of the water agencies, landowners, users of private water wells and advocacy groups. She also managed grant funds for watershed improvement projects and followed up other decades of restoration work that the organization.

"We are really fortunate to have been given this opportunity," said Nancy Scolari, the RCD's Executive Director. "She'll not only bring her experience and energy to help tackle one of the County's most difficult issues, but she'll also be seeking grant funds to help with the projects.

Marin County is providing funding for the new program. Phillips welcomes calls from anyone involved with our local creeks and nearby properties at the RCD in Point Reyes Station, Sarah@marinrec.org (415) 663-1170, ext. 302.

For further information: Nancy Scolari, nancy@marinrec.org, (415) 663-1176, ext. 301. Sarah Phillips, Sarah@marinrec.org, (415) 663-1176, ext. 302.

Remembrance

Elizabeth Owen, Reporting for Work

By Jim Krovetz, co-founder and former editor, West Marin Citizen.

In October 2008, Elizabeth Owen emailed me to say she had suffered a fall.

"Hi Jim, I'm ok, just overly bunched up from falling on my face Monday morning while looking at flowers in a friend's garden instead of the path. Big bang on forehead — lots of cuts, lacerations and blood because I was on a prescription for thinning blood to prevent blood clots and strokes. Also, spasms in left wrist, broken nose (2 vertebrae) cerebral hemorrhage and small concussion (still hurts). I just got out of MGH Sat. afternoon. Feel better each day — lots of loving care from Earlie and my kids. I have a very annoying bruise on my neck for (5) months, and a cast on left arm for another week. I can do some eating if you need it.

I am not distracted by the details of her injuries, she quickly sent me a following email stressing her main point:

"Jim, to reiterate: I WILL be able to work tomorrow morning and I really want to do so."

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