

Marin Voice - Oyster bill: What's at stake?

Marin Independent Journal

Posted: 10/13/2009 12:07:18 AM PDT

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IF the "Drakes Bay Paradise Estates" 800-home beachfront subdivision (IJ, Sept. 26) had been built, it would have ruined forever wildlife- rich Drakes Estero and its twin Limantour Estero. These magnificent tidelands are the wilderness heart of the Point Reyes National Seashore.

Marin owes a debt to the Ken Burns' "National Parks - America's Best Idea." This timely series reveals the degradation in national parks where commercial interests, with the help of their legislators, get their foot in the door.

Today, we have a similar crisis in our hard won national seashore.

Under lobbying pressure, Sen. Dianne Feinstein slipped a rider into the Interior Appropriations bill now under consideration. This rider, designed to avoid public and congressional debate, would wrongly extend Kevin Lunny's Drakes Bay Oyster Co.'s lease of acres of potential wilderness tidelands in Drakes Estero.

Lunny knew his lease is to expire in 2012 and revert to wilderness status, when he bought it on speculation in 2005. Feinstein's rider undermines the seashore and sets a precedent for all our national parks to well-connected opportunists and their paid lobbyists.

Faced with opposition in the senate, Sen. Feinstein amended the rider to give Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar appearance of control over the lease terms. But in fact, she tied his hands to make any decision except to extend the lease.

The fight to save Point Reyes and West Marin (1957-76) was a major land-use battle to prevent its LosAngelization. The public was thrilled when State Sen. Peter Behr collected 500,000 signatures, persuading President Richard Nixon to complete the purchase of the national seashore in 1972.

I strongly support family farms within the seashore but oppose shellfish farms and tasting bars in the potential wilderness areas of Drakes Estero. While oysters may be a green moneymaker, there are other waters where oysters may be grown just as profitably.

Why protect Drakes Estero?

It shelters the largest rookery of breeding and pupping harbor seals on the north coast. It is a vital nursery for ocean fish. It is refuge for migratory ocean birds, its shoals home to countless invertebrates nourished by tidal water from the ocean. It is a magical, isolated, historic inlet on the wild, rugged coast.

The 1976 Point Reyes Wilderness Protection Act set aside areas within the seashore for federal wilderness status: limited access, no development, no commerce. It stated: "In terms of preserving and protecting marine life systems Drakes Estero and Limantour Estero could well be considered the most significant ecological units within the national seashore."

On Sept. 16, Peter Douglas of the California Coastal Commission sent a notice of noncompliance to Lunny and to Congress, stating that Lunny was operating beyond the scope of his lease and has failed to obtain necessary permits.

To justify the rider, Sen. Feinstein ordered a review of the oyster issues by the National Academy of Sciences. This was a political act.

Those who cherish wilderness will be stunned to drive over the narrow winding road and come upon Lunny's oyster operation and tasting bar surrounded by cars, degrading the head of Drakes Estero. This is not part of the fabric of a national wilderness.

Sen. Feinstein's rider must now be reconciled with the House appropriations bill. Our representatives, Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey and others, need to hear from us urgently that this rider is a bad idea and should be stripped entirely from the bill. It sets a dangerous precedent for all our wilderness areas and national parks.

It's your seashore, your tidelands, your wilderness.

Dr. Martin Griffin of Belvedere is a co-founder of Audubon Canyon Ranch and the Marin Environmental Forum. He is the author of "Saving the Marin-Sonoma Coast."