

>

By Alex Breitler
Record Staff Writer

[Print Page](#)

October 27, 2014 12:01AM

Spanos Cos. sets aside 140 acres, and the habitat is thriving

These cottonwood trees were spindly little sticks when schoolchildren first poked them into the ground.

Five years later, some of the trees are pushing 20 feet tall, and some of the schoolchildren are pushing adulthood.

Give nature a nudge, and quite often, she'll handle it from there — even if it does take a while.

More than 140 acres of habitat restored by The Spanos Cos. finally looks like real, thriving wetland, the kind that once blanketed the Central Valley before humans planted crops and built cities.

It is no small irony that a major developer is attempting to reverse some of that history.

And it's true that the newly restored wetland on Shin Kee Tract, west of Lodi, makes business sense for Spanos. The company is required to offset environmental harm from its housing projects.

Still, as the company's senior vice president David Nelson walked the perimeter of the wetland last week, he talked about a fundamental change in how people — even developers — regard undeveloped places.

"In the course of the last 20 or 30 years I think everybody, society as a whole, has developed a new sensitivity but also a new, or maybe a rediscovered, appreciation for the value of habitat," Nelson said. "I think everybody is trying to figure out what the right balance is between development and preservation."



Wild roses dot the landscape around 140 acres of restored habitat on Shin Kee Tract, west of Lodi. CRAIG SANDERS/THE RECORD

Snakes alive

While ducks ply the water and native plants crowd the shore, what this preserve is really about is providing sanctuary for the foul-smelling giant garter snake, a creature that is actually quite shy and not nearly as fearsome as it sounds.

These snakes were recently discovered in San Joaquin County for the first time in 15 years. Because they are an endangered species, developers or anyone else planning a project that might harm the snakes must "mitigate" or make up for that harm.

In this case, about 60 acres of the new wetland will serve as mitigation for Spanos' two developments: the partially built Westlake Villages adjacent to Spanos Park West, and the future Delta Cove project on Atlas Tract.

But Nelson argues the wetlands will do much more than simply prevent harm to the species. He believes the Shin Kee wetlands will be an improvement, since the "habitat" that is being replaced consists mostly of scattered irrigation ditches that can only loosely be considered "wetlands."

Shin Kee Tract is much different. Once farmed by a man known as the "Chinese Potato King," the land is adjacent to the White Slough Wildlife Area, which is also believed to offer comfortable accommodations for the snake. Put together, the two create one larger block of habitat, said Eric C. Hansen, an independent consultant who is the area's foremost expert on giant garter snakes.

"It's a fantastic opportunity," Hansen said.

He cautioned that the new wetland's success will hinge on the size of the replanted tules. The cold-blooded snakes enjoy basking in the sunshine; tules allow them protection while they do so, wrapping themselves around the reeds. If a predator appears, the snakes can simply plunge back into the water.

With enough tules, the Spanos wetland "will contribute significantly to the conservation of giant garter snakes in the eastern Delta," Hansen said.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, charged with protecting the snake, said the agency believes the Spanos wetland is "on track to succeed" and has the "potential" to be good habitat.

Bank on it

Slow-growth advocate and planner Eric Parfrey, a frequent critic of developers' northward march in Stockton, said that while 140 acres of new wetlands may not sound like much, it's "a pretty big deal" for those who are interested in protecting the snake.

With 60 acres of the wetland being used to mitigate the two developments, that leaves more than 80 acres that could count toward other future projects. The Spanos company is considering starting a "mitigation bank" in which other agencies could pay the company for credits, offsetting the impacts of their own projects.

For example, if Caltrans wanted to widen a road and was required to mitigate for some tiny piece of snake habitat, the agency could pay Spanos for credits representing a sliver of the new wetland.

Such private banks can be "incredibly lucrative" for their owners, while also streamlining projects and providing protection for endangered species, Parfrey said.

"I think these garter snake mitigation banks in particular have some degree of success," he said.

While the wetland is not open to the public, Stockton students still visit occasionally as part of a special science curriculum there.

As for Spanos, the project demonstrates that the company is about more than building homes, Nelson said.

"Fifty years from now our kids or grandkids could be standing in the same location, and this habitat will be here," he said. "Likewise, with some of the revitalization that's going on downtown and some of the growth that's occurring at the urban boundary of Stockton, they can stand in those places and see a rich, revitalized community.

"I think it's great that we can do both."

Contact reporter Alex Breitler at (209) 546-8295 or abreitler@recordnet.com. Follow him at recordnet.com/breitlerblog and on Twitter @alexbreitler.

Habitat restoration

The new wetland on Shin Kee Tract, west of Interstate 5 and south of Highway 12, could indirectly help with even more habitat restoration efforts across Northern California. That's because employees with a Livermore-based commercial seed bank recently visited Shin Kee and harvested the seeds of some native plants there. Those seeds will be kept in a 22,000-square-foot warehouse and sold to some other group or agency attempting to restore similar habitat. David Gilpin, head of Pacific Coast Seed, said it's not yet clear exactly where the seeds taken from Shin Kee Tract will go. "I think it's a very interesting site, and I think it's great what they've accomplished," Gilpin said.

<http://www.recordnet.com/article/20141027/NEWS/141029646>

Print Page