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## WETLANDS: Fed program for restoring S.F. Bay salt ponds to begin in 2008

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REDWOOD CITY, Calif. – This is the time of year when millions of migrating birds pay a visit to San Francisco Bay. Standing alone on the rocks or floating in flocks numbering in the thousands, they can be found at scores of sites along the bay's 1,000 miles of shoreline.

Even as thousands of cars and trucks daily zip across the nearby Dumbarton Bridge spanning the southern end of the bay, these annual visitors follow their own routines, resting, nesting or foraging for food in the channels and marshes of the San Francisco National Wildlife Refuge system.

Over time they will have another local playground here, in the form of restored tidal wetlands created from the 15,000 acres of commercial salt ponds that state and federal agencies bought for \$200 million from the Cargill Corp. in 2003. As part of a 50-year South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project described in a recently completed environmental impact statement/report, three expanses of bay wetlands – some still used for commercial salt production – will slowly transform from managed ponds to predominantly saltwater tidal habitat.

The final EIR/EIS, prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game, was previewed to a stakeholders advisory group last Friday prior to its publication in the *Federal Register* sometime this month.

It sets out three alternatives for development, explained Steve Ritchie, executive manager of the South Bay project. A "no action" plan would involve little or no restoration of the properties and would provide no new public access or recreational amenities. A second alternative sketches out a scenario in which half the land would be managed as low-salinity ponds while half would be restored to tidal habitat. The more ambitious alternative foresees a 90 percent saltwater tidal habitat with just 10 percent of the land managed for flood control.

The intent of the plan is less to achieve a certain split of the lands than to apply adaptive management techniques to find the proper balance of restoration while enhancing fishing, duck hunting and other recreational opportunities where public access had previously been limited by Cargill's commercial operations.



The Cargill salt ponds in the southern portion of San Francisco Bay will be returned to tidal wetlands under a 50-year South Bay project. Photo courtesy of NASA.

Although planners took the advice of legal counsel in identifying the third alternative as a preferred option, Ritchie said, "You'll probably never hear us talk about a preferred alternative again because our approach is to move from B to C. We'll end up somewhere between 50/50 and 90/10."

There are six project objectives, each equally important, Ritchie said:

- Promoting restoration of native special-status plants and animals and supporting a diverse mix of habitat to accommodate native plants and the resident and migratory bird populations.
- Improving flood control in the South Bay.
- Providing public access and recreation that is compatible with wildlife and habitat goals.
- Protecting or improving water quality.
- Improving management and control of invasive plant species.
- Protecting the services provided by existing utility and transportation infrastructure in the heavily urbanized corridors

that flank the bay.

To a large degree, how far the plan advances will depend on how much money can be secured to meet the estimated \$500 million it will take to complete the project. "We've made a clear commitment to secure funding" to do as much restoration as possible, he said. But if the adaptive plan is not working, "We'll stop, start over and pick one plan and build it. We're convinced this is the way to go, but we want to do it right or we're not going to do it at all," Ritchie said. "This is a progression over time. It's not a race to alternative C, but a race to knowledge so we can make the best decisions."

## Timeline

If responses from the stakeholders are an indication, the only problem seen in the plan is that it will take 50 years to complete.

Tom Laine, a commercial fisher of brine shrimp, has been consistent in his attempt to push FWS and DFG faster and further than they have been willing to go in breaching old levees and restoring salt water to the dozens of ponds that make up the Cargill properties. "Salinity is slowly rising in the South Bay," he said, noting increased presence of Dungeness crabs and fish such as halibut and bass that used to be abundant in the bay 45 years ago. "We need more area to get more salt water, and we could cut this plan from 50 years to 25," Laine said.

Still, Laine was generally complimentary of the agencies' interim management of the lands that so far dealt mainly with emergency repairs to flow control gates and surveying the ponds to determine which should be flooded first.



An area along the bay, now described as a "moonscape" by federal officials, will be part of a 50-year wetlands restoration effort. Initial projects will involve breaching levees, repairing water flow control facilities, and installing view points, trails and other amenities. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

The first phase of the project will commence early next year targeting the restoration of about 10 percent of the total properties in three locations: Ravenswood in Redwood City; Alviso along the southern tip of the bay; and Eden Landing, near Alameda on the eastern shore. Besides restoring some 1,610 acres of tidal ponds, the early work will also provide enhancement for 710 acres of bird habitat and create about 8 miles of new public access trails. Public amenities will include viewing areas with interpretive features and a kayak launch on Alameda Creek.

The announcement that work on one of these proposed trails, a 2.5 mile path from Sunnyvale to Steven's Creek, would begin in 2008 drew sustained applause from the stakeholders. Laura Thompson, project manager of the Bay Trail Project, which is cobbling together a 500-mile public access trail around the bay, said that people have been trying to secure access to the land for more than a decade but faced impediments because the trail runs through Moffett Field, the former naval air station.

overall goals of increasing public access. Currently the Bay Trail project has developed nearly 300 miles of trails, while continuing to press transportation authorities to allow for greater bicycle and pedestrian access on several bridges that cross the bay.

Although the South Bay project will initially add 7.7 miles of new trails, Thompson said it fits very well with the initiative's

One aspect of the project that had been planned for next year will need to be delayed, however. The incursion of invasive spartina in the waters surrounding one of the largest Alviso ponds means that a 360-acre restoration will have to wait until 2010, Ritchie said.

In all, Ritchie expects the first phase of the project from 2008 to 2010 to cost about \$31 million, with much of that already committed from a variety of state and private sources. Increased federal funding for future phases could come as a result of having the Army Corps of Engineers take on some of the flood control projects, he added.

[Click here](#) to read the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Plan documents.