

Federal Monies Back Salt Pond Flow Project

by Ian Bauer

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Santa Clara Valley Water District announced it will receive a portion of federal monies under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, covering Pond A8 of the Alviso Slough Restoration Project, which is meant to increase the habitat of endangered or threatened species in the San Francisco Bay.

Susan Siravo, the water district's public information officer, said monies involve a \$1-million National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant to help fund the estimated \$3-million Pond A8 Notch Construction project.

"This project is intended to increase the tidal flow in Alviso Slough and help maintain the channel and increase salt in the waters," Siravo said.

Located west of the South Bay Yacht Club in Alviso, Pond A8 is visible among other ponds of similar size all formerly named, owned and used by Cargill Salt for salt manufacturing. The ponds are now owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Pond A8 project a multi-agency effort that includes the California Coastal Conservancy and the water district that comes under the larger South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, considered the largest tidal wetland restoration project on the West Coast. When complete, the project should restore 15,100 acres of industrial salt ponds to tidal wetlands.

Pond A8 will be the first one worked on. A 40-foot-wide notch containing a controllable concrete and steel gate system would be inserted in the levee on Alviso Slough, and initially opened to 20 feet. A channel will be dredged from the notch to the slough downstream of the Guadalupe River.

It is expected that the incoming water will fill and flow into other ponds, raising the water level about 2 feet, and scour out and deepen this section of Alviso Slough. The scouring is expected to increase the slough's salinity, increase its capacity to contain flood flows and aid boat navigation.

Tidal action will be controlled to avoid eroding the levee at

another nearby pond, which protects San Jose and Alviso from flooding. If possible, over time, the notch will be opened to 40 feet, reports state.

"This is really a big-time experiment," Steve Ritchie, executive project manager of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, said.

Ritchie added one of the main concerns and a serious question for this project is the presence of toxic mercury a heavy, silver-white metal found in the former salt ponds.

"What we have in Pond A8 as in other ponds is concentrated mercury," he said.

Ritchie suggested these ponds have higher levels of mercury than the rest of the bay because of the proximity to the New Almaden Mine.

"The ponds have been sitting there for a hundred years collecting mercury," he said.

Ritchie added if it appeared there could be health effects on wildlife or people, the constructed notch project will be closed as the A8 actions and studies would have significant implications for management of other ponds, in terms of mercury, scouring and increasing salinity.

"If it becomes much more of a problem we'll have to find a different way to manage the ponds," he said.

Still, Ritchie said partnering agencies including the Resources Legacy Fund, the U.S. Geological Survey, University of California at Davis and the San Francisco Estuary Institute would carefully monitor the controlled flow of waters from the ponds and the possible influx of mercury into bay waters.

"The point we're all after is to restore all of the ponds in the area to tidal action," Ritchie said. "This is a kind of demonstration project..."

The overall Alviso Slough Restoration Project has had setbacks in recent months.

In June, the Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury stated in a report that the Santa Clara Valley Water District should cease funding for the Alviso Slough Restoration Project and ensure areas with obvious potential flood damage are addressed first.

The grand jury stated even though the Alviso Slough project

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would restore boating to the area, it threatens the environment nearby.

Due in part to the criticisms of the grand jury's report, the water district is giving more review and taking greater public input to the overall draft environmental impact report, which includes the Pond A8 project.

Katherine Oven, the water district's deputy operating officer for watershed capital programs, said the water district's Board of Directors will review and potentially approve the completed draft EIR document later this month.

"We're hoping to be able to start the bidding process (for the Pond A8 project contractor) toward the end of August," she said.

Oven added once a contractor is chosen, construction on the Pond A8 notch would likely begin in October.

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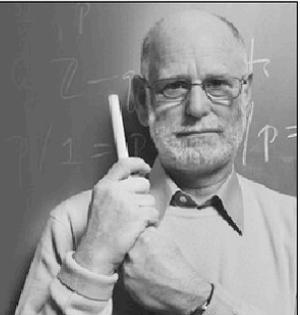


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