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The Almanac

Today: Wetlands restoration takes next step

Meeting in Menlo Park on Thursday will update the public on the project

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==B By Miranda Simon==

==I Special to the Almanac==

The project to restore historic wetlands near Menlo Park is about to begin the second phase of a 50-year marathon, and the public has been invited to help plan this next step.

A public meeting will be held at the Menlo Park Library, from 1 to 4 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 10, to discuss updates on the \$1 billion project to revive 15,000 acres of wetlands around the South Bay. In particular, the meeting will focus on Phase 2 of the plan for the seven-pond Ravenswood complex, located near the Dumbarton Bridge.

Ravenswood, occupying about 1,500 acres, is one of three pond complexes to be restored as part of the project.

The South Bay salt ponds, long operated by Cargill Inc., a salt supplier based in Minneapolis, were purchased for \$100 million with federal and state funds in 2003. The 15,100-acre purchase was part of a larger effort to restore 40,000 acres of historic wetlands in the San Francisco Bay.

Cargill retained 9,000 acres in the East Bay for salt production and 2.2 square miles in Redwood City for development.

In 2008, after a four-year planning process, the restoration project finally started rolling.

Pond SF2, part of the Ravenswood complex, was restored and a 0.7-mile trail was opened to the public.

Shorebirds, sandpipers and ducks are already leaving their footprints on the sand, said John Bourgeois, executive planner of the project. Snowy plovers, an endangered species, will be nesting on the dry, bare ground of the Ravenswood ponds in a few months, he said.

"In seven years we went from planning to putting the project on the ground -- that's very fast for a project this size," Mr. Bourgeois said.

But several elements are impeding the project from rolling faster, the main one being lack of a completed flood-control plan, said Eric Mruz, of the project's management team.

As engineers lower existing levees and let water flow into the dry salt ponds, they are wary of over-flooding the area. New and costly levees need to be built further inland for the restoration of many of Ravenswood's ponds, and planners are waiting for a study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to be completed in 2015, Mr. Mruz said.

Highway 84, a PG&E substation and other nearby infrastructure may be at risk from flooding without appropriate flood control, Mr. Bourgeois said, so planners have to tread slowly.

"In restoration, you lower the levees. Marshes and wetlands develop through natural sediment creation. There is some groundwork to be done but it's nothing" compared to the construction of levees, said Brenda Buxton, project manager with the California Coastal Conservancy, the lead coordinating agency.

Still, engineers are not too concerned with speed, or lack thereof. There are many benefits in dawdling.

Questions and uncertainties -- which will be presented at the Feb. 10 meeting -- have needed time and observation to surface.

In order to protect the habitat of species that have adapted to the salt-scape, engineers will have to keep some ponds as "managed ponds" -- which means funneling water quickly through the ponds to inhibit salt production, Mr. Mruz said -- but the ponds to be managed need to be selected.

According to a South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project draft agenda, the Feb. 10 meeting will discuss ways to to facilitate public viewing of the wetlands -- one of the pillars of the project.

A slow moving project will also help planners apply for more funding.

Ms. Buxton laughed at the prospect of figuring out where the restoration funds would come from in the next 43 years. Flood-control levees are not even on the horizon yet, said Ms. Buxton, who was busy applying for a grant during the time of the interview.

The levees will likely eat up 60 percent of the \$1 billion planned for the project, Mr. Bourgeois said.

"Especially with the state budget, it will be a constant struggle," he added. The \$1 billion project, which is being lead by a myriad of state and local agencies as well as individual stakeholders, has many sources of funding.

According to Mr. Bourgeois, on top of the \$100 million needed to purchase the land from Cargill, the project has required \$15 million to \$20 million for early planning and design and \$25 million to \$30 million for Phase 1 construction.

Apart from a \$5 million stimulus from the federal government, agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (owner of the Ravenswood ponds), and the California Coastal Conservancy are funding different aspects of the projects, Mr. Bourgeois said. The city of Menlo Park contributed \$500,000.

==B INFORMATION:== The Ravenswood Working Group of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project will meet from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 10, at Menlo Park Library downstairs meeting room, 800 Alma St. in Menlo Park. The public is invited.

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