

The Almanac

Seeking compromise on wetlands restoration

How can agencies protect species while giving the public greater access?

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==I Special to the Almanac==

The Menlo Park Library was flooded with new ideas Feb. 10 as experts and locals debated the next steps in restoring the Ravenswood salt ponds near the Dumbarton Bridge.

There are several obstacles on the road to restoration, so local residents, engineers and scientists delved into a four-hour exercise in creative thinking on how to work around them.

Transforming the six salt ponds into wetlands and marshes involves funneling water into them. This may result in over-flooding around Highway 84 leading to the Dumbarton Bridge if new levees aren't built -- a process that requires both planning and funding, and will probably not be achieved over the next several years.

This led the discussion to shift toward another important aspect of the project: building trails and opening areas to public access -- and all the benefits and detriments that may entail.

The Ravenswood salt ponds complex is part of 15,000 acres of historic wetlands to be restored in the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project. The South Bay salt ponds, long operated by Cargill Inc., a salt supplier based in Minneapolis, were purchased for \$100 million in federal and state funds in 2003.

Since then, Pond SF2, south of the Dumbarton Bridge has been restored, with a 0.7-mile trail built at the pond site, complete with descriptive panels. Locals and experts are now debating how to continue with the restoration and create public access without harming the habitat of the species in the area.

"We had good and vigorous discussion on the results and the tradeoffs balancing public access and the goals of the (Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife) Refuge to protect endangered species," said John Bourgeois, manager of the South Bay restoration project.

As one can imagine, letting neighbors walk their dogs where endangered snowy plovers nest may not be such a good idea. But opening the area to visitors may bring public attention to the project -- and maybe some much-needed cash from private investors. Reaching this compromise was one of the main goals of the meeting.

Caitlin Robinson-Nilsen from the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory outlined the areas where snowy plovers have nested in the past and offered ideas for trails where the plovers would be out of harms way; Sheryl Strong from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service led a discussion on how to shoo away California gulls, one of the snowy plovers' main predators; and long-time residents reminisced about historic trails around the ponds that they'd like to see reopened.

"After hearing input from the public, we will compile the information and come up with what we think is going to be our plan," Mr. Bourgeois said. By summer, the team plans to hire a consultant to handle the permitting and environmental reports needed for the Ravenswood area, he said.

But all this must be done on a short budget, he said. The project received \$8 million in grants from the federal government last year but will not be getting much in federal funds this year.

President Obama has pledged to veto legislation containing earmarks -- precisely what the project had relied on until now, Mr. Bourgeois said.

"With this climate of no new earmarks, it's going to be more difficult to get the money we need," he said, adding that the

project is looking toward state bonds and private investment to move forward.

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