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Bair Island restoration nears approval

Plan will renew 1,400 acres of brown wetlands

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Inside Bay Area

REDWOOD CITY — Despite the iconic nickname of the Bay Area, many locals are too caught up in the everyday urban hustle to enjoy the literal shoreline.

San Mateo County residents can get a taste of the Bay's historic ecology at Bair Island, and the plan to restore 1,400 acres of wetlands there is finally on the verge of a green light — figuratively and literally.

"This brown island's going to turn green," said David Lewis, executive director of the environmental advocacy group Save the Bay. "So much has died off. This restoration is really going to be visible from one of the most public stretches of highway in the area."

The final federal and state environmental impact report for the Bair Island Restoration and Management Plan was finished in late July, and federal approval is expected as early as Aug. 28 for the \$10 million undertaking, which will let volunteers help in the return of saltwater marsh habitat.

The current cost estimate is well below the \$25 million forecast just two years ago, thanks to a shift in thinking about dredging.

"Now it looks like people are going to pay us to bring in fill materials starting this summer," said Clyde Morris, manager of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, which includes the 3,000-acre Bair Island.

He said the previous plan involved paying for 1 million cubic yards of fill material each summer for the site, but construction companies are now poised to pay the refuge for the privilege of dumping their dredge on Bair, which has subsided 2 1/2 feet since the 1940s.

The Port of Redwood City is eager to channel its dredged silt across Redwood Creek to Bair instead of shipping it to a deep hole near Alcatraz, according to Port Director Michael Giari. He said other firms dump silt miles out into the ocean.

A pilot program this summer will bring 60,000 cubic yards of fill to Inner Bair Island, Morris said, with the process going full-speed-ahead next year.

Then, he said the first breach of levees that keep the saltwater of the Bay from naturally renewing the wetlands is planned for fall 2007 on Outer Bair Island.

To facilitate the restoration, volunteers have removed 20,000 pounds of invasive iceplant since 2003, while canoeing along Middle Bair Island, and have experimented with planting several native species, including salt grass, marsh gumplant, sea lavender and jaumea, Lewis said.

More outings are set for Sept. 16 and Oct. 7 to both clean up the shore and remove more iceplant. Details are available at <http://www.savesfbay.org>.

"A big part of our mission is reconnecting people to the Bay — making them appreciate what's possible," Lewis said. "It's the largest urban wildlife refuge in the United States."

Morris said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has workshops in Alviso and Fremont for South Bay teachers, and the agency wants to conduct the same training for Redwood City and San Carlos teachers to pass on to their pupils during visits to Bair.

There are plenty more positives for the community thanks to the restoration project, Morris said. The fishing industry, which faced a tough ban on salmon catches this season, can expect to see more steelhead and salmon in the vicinity.

Morris said when the species migrate from the ocean through the Bay to their spawning grounds, a good number of the fish spend time in Redwood Creek and several South Bay inlets.

"Any restoring of marshes always helps the fisheries," he said. "Tidal marsh is key. Bair Island will be another step in the right direction."

Lewis said that in addition to replenishing habitat for rare birds such as the California clapper rail and other creatures including the salt marsh harvest mouse — the only mammal that thrives there — the restoration should reduce the mosquito population by letting water flow freely instead of pooling up to create breeding grounds.

And he said nascent oyster re-populating projects in the area will complement the renewal among the 3,000-acre island system's sloughs, cleansing the Bay's water as they "help recreate what the historical habitat was."

View the Bair Island restoration report at <http://southbayrestoration.org/Bair-EIR-EIS-Final.html>.