

REGIONAL: Controlled levee breach to launch the opening of 630 acres to San Francisco Bay

Contributed by Editor
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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA – On Sept. 13, the California Department of Fish and Game will mark a major milestone in the decades-long effort to restore wetlands in the San Francisco Bay.

After a 1 p.m. ceremony, DFG's contractor will conduct a controlled levee breach of the first of eight breaches in the Eden Landing Ecological Reserve, allowing Bay waters, fish and other wildlife back in to 630 acres of former wetlands along the shore of Hayward and Union City.

“We have lost the overwhelming majority of our wetlands here in California. It is our responsibility to protect and restore the areas we do have,” said California Secretary for Natural Resources John Laird. “This project is a great example of what can be accomplished with cooperation and long-term vision. The restoration of these wetlands will provide much needed habitat for birds, fish and other wildlife, while moving California toward a healthier ecosystem.”

The breach of this levee, along with seven that will follow in coming weeks will open earthen berms built by salt-making companies and flood-control projects in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As excavators take the last bite out of a berm along Pond E8A, inundating it, they will be laying the groundwork for the reestablishment of tidal salt marshes that were eliminated by the construction of the levees.

Bay waters and adjacent creek inflows introduced this month are expected to bring fish, crabs, harbor seals and other marine life as well as multitudes of native and migratory birds back into previously diked ponds.

The water will also bring sediments that will settle into the pond and provide a bed for the regrowth of pickleweed, marsh gumplant, saltgrass and other native tidal marsh plants that provide habitat for the endangered California clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse.

The opening of Ponds E8A, E9 and E8X – three former salt evaporation ponds in Eden Landing – marks the first South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project construction project completed on state-owned lands.

Restoration efforts on the 630 acres were partly funded by American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grants through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The Eden Landing construction project created 40 jobs in addition to making a significant step toward wetlands restoration in the Bay.

As of the completion of this work, the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project has restored nearly 3,000 acres of salt ponds to tidal action in the South Bay.

The project is the largest tidal wetland restoration effort on the West Coast. Its goal is to restore at least 7,500 acres to tidal marsh habitat, while also enhancing pond habitat, expanding Bay access and recreation, and improving flood protection.

"This marsh restoration project doubles the area of the Reserve now open to the tides,” said John Krause, the DFG Wildlife Biologist who manages the Reserve. “It's a very different landscape from what it was five years ago.”

The work at the three ponds was conducted through a collaborative partnership between by DFG, NOAA, the State Coastal Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, and other local partners.

NOAA has provided a total of \$7.4 million in ARRA funds to the South Bay Salt Pond Project to create jobs and restore habitats in and around the bay.

The funds helped not only the 630-acre Eden Landing restoration, which received \$3.2 million in grants, but a total of 2,360 acres of project restoration work, as well as contributing to the battle against invasive Spartina, a non-native cordgrass that degrades marsh and mudflat habitat.