

Feds want marsh recovery effort around Marin's shores and rest of the bay

By Mark Prado

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday announced a massive 50-year, \$1.5 billion tidal marsh recovery effort that will include wetlands along Marin's shores.

The goal: to restore roughly 25,000 acres of marsh to help protect six endangered species.

The plan is more a call to action than an enforceable document. There is no money presently and the recovery effort will be entirely voluntary, seeking to capitalize on existing projects and groups who are already working to restore marshland areas - the muddy stretches along bays that are sanctuaries for bird, mammal and plant species. Many have been diked over the years for farming and development.

"Only 8 percent of the San Francisco Bay's historic tidal marshes remain viable today," said Susan Moore, field supervisor in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Sacramento office. "Along much of the bay the natural width of the tidal marshes has been squeezed in drastically, sometimes to just a few yards."

Of the 190,000 acres of tidal marshes that existed in the bay before the Gold Rush, only 16,000 acres remain. Another 24,000 acres have been restored or are in the process of being restored - giving the bay only about one-fifth of the tidal marsh area it once had.

Marshes along the lips of Richardson and San Pablo bays are addressed in the plan, including areas from China Camp north to the Petaluma River, where 1,000 acres of marshlands would be restored to help species. Tidal marsh areas at Bolinas Lagoon, Drakes and Limantour esteros and portions of Tomales Bay are also included.

Release of the draft plan opens a 120-day public comment period, during which there will be several public meetings, including one possibly in Marin in March.

"We want to mesh all the projects' work going on already with those that will occur in the future," said Al Donner, a spokesman for the wildlife service.

At Hamilton in Novato, the state Coastal Conservancy is working on such a restoration that includes an adjacent property at Bel Marin Keys, making the total project 2,500 acres.

Six federally protected species are the direct focus of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plan: the California clapper rail, a shorebird; the salt marsh harvest mouse; and four rare plants, the Suisun thistle, soft bird's-beak, California sea-blite and salt marsh bird's-beak.

"These species are the focus, but by helping them, we also help the marshlands," Donner said, adding that the plan is to take them off the endangered list to a less dangerous "threatened" status.

The plan would improve conditions for 11 other imperiled species that do not have formal protection under the federal Endangered Species Act, including song sparrows, shrews and voles.

A wide range of actions are envisioned by the plan, including habitat acquisitions and protection, monitoring surveys and research, achieved with broad public cooperation and coordination.

In the North Bay, up until the mid-19th century, there were some 55,000 acres of wetlands, providing ideal conditions for migrating waterfowl, a nursery for a variety of fish species and an incubator for plants.

As people settled nearby the area was diked and drained and claimed for agriculture and housing. About 82 percent of San Pablo Bay's marshes and wetlands were diked by the time of the Great Depression. Today, about 10,000 acres remain as wetlands.

To comment on and view the plan, visit: www.fws.gov/sacramento

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