

Menlo Park: Massive South Bay salt restoration project could start this summer

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The Mercury News

Posted: Wed Apr 27 00:00:00 MDT 2016

A plan to restore a Manhattan-sized swath of wetlands that rings the Bay along the Peninsula and South Bay could begin to impact Menlo Park residents as early as this summer.

That's when trucks hauling dirt may start showing up in droves at Bedwell Bayfront Park, a staging area for the construction of levees and transition zones between habitat ponds in marshes surrounding the park.

According to an environmental impact report, the truck traffic will be the only significant impact caused by the 13-year-old South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project.

If not by summer, construction will definitely be happening by year's end, said John Bourgeois, the project's executive manager.

"Increased truck traffic (will be) coming through the park to build these flood features," Bourgeois told The Daily News on Tuesday. "It's going to look like an earth-moving construction site."

The work could last a couple of years, he added. After the levees are built, a salt pond team will create a trench where an outer pond meets the Bay to let baywater rush in for the first time in more than a century.

"Late 2018 is when you start seeing changes in the habitat," Bourgeois said. "The Bay is going to be doing its thing and bringing in the sediment and the fish and (vegetation)."

The project, which is taking place on land owned by the federal government and three counties, is a multi-agency effort to restore tidal marsh habitat, improve flood protection and provide recreation and public access opportunities on 15,100 acres of former salt-evaporation ponds.

Bourgeois calls it an area the size of Manhattan.

"Working on that scale has been unprecedented in the Bay Area," he added.

On April 21, Bourgeois led a tour through the planned restoration work area attended by government and nonprofit representatives, as well as about a dozen community members. He was joined by Beth Huning of project partner San Francisco Bay Joint Venture, San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex public affairs officer Doug Cordell, and San Mateo County Supervisor Dave Pine.

Pine is pushing the Clean and Healthy Bay Ballot Measure, also known as Measure AA, an annual \$12 parcel tax proposed for nine Bay Area counties that would generate \$500 million over 20 years for Bay restoration, including the salt pond project. At least two-thirds of voters must approve the measure in June to impose the tax.

"It's really a historic measure," said Pine, adding that passage would be based on the total vote, not per county. "No one county can block it. ... The goal would be to leverage that money, particularly with federal sources, to help fund the work here."

Pine added that half of the money would be distributed geographically, which equates to about \$28 million per county over the 20-year period.

Bourgeois said work planned for the next two years -- referred to as Phase 2; the first phase wrapped up last year -- already has funding sources.

But while Phase 2 is set financially, the public has until May 26 to comment on the environmental report (bit.ly/sbsaltpond) for that work. On that day, if no significant objections are raised, the California State Coastal Conservancy's governing board is to consider ratifying the plan.

Funding for future phases is not so clear, and the project could stretch over decades. When state and federal agencies purchased restoration project land from Cargill Salt for \$100 million in 2003, the salt pond project was developed with a 50-year vision.

Pine said the scientific community "has a real consensus" that the Bay Area needs 100,000 acres of healthy tidal wetlands to support fish and bird habitat, and to protect against flooding.

"We've got to get those wetlands in place so they can evolve and stay apace of sea level rise," Pine said.

A 2012 study by the National Academy of Sciences found that the Bay will rise by a foot in the next 20 years and will be 2 feet higher by 2050.

The new phase of work focuses on three areas: the Ravenswood ponds abutting Menlo Park; the Alviso ponds bordering Mountain View and Alviso; and the Eden Landing ponds near Hayward.

Locally, under a preferred plan, that involves adding a new recreation trail south of Bedwell to connect with existing park trails and a viewing platform; transitioning a 295-acre pond to a marsh and improving the quality and diversity at two other ponds; and enhancing and creating berms and levees for flood control.

"You come back here in five years and this is going to be a very unique spot to come to," Bourgeois during the tour.

Along with the easternmost pond being restored to marsh, two small ponds closest to Bedwell and the Bayfront Expressway will be "managed similar to duck ponds managed by the city," but the 270-acre pond directly across from Facebook's West Campus will stay relatively unchanged to support the threatened western snowy plover, which took up residence at those ponds when they were still salt flats.

"You're going to be able to view three different habitat types from (the viewing platform)," Bourgeois said.

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