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## 50-year plan for turning South Bay salt ponds to tidal wetlands

Jane Kay, Chronicle Environment Writer

Wednesday, December 12, 2007



State and federal wildlife officials will unveil an ambitious wetlands restoration plan Wednesday that promises strong levees around South Bay homes and businesses, new bayside trails for hikers and more places for bird watchers to spot shorebirds and ducks.

The plan is the first phase of a \$1 billion, 50-year effort to restore thousands of acres of former Cargill Inc. salt ponds purchased by the government four years ago.

Various wildlife agencies will work together to expand the bay's wildlife habitat and build trails and nature centers as part of the long-term restoration. They also will construct solid levees to prevent flooding from periodic storms and rising seas associated with global warming.

The first round of projects, which will be built between 2008 and 2010, will cost \$32 million, officials said. Much of the money likely will come from bonds already approved by state voters.

"We're going to be adding public access where it never existed under Cargill," said Clyde Morris, the manager of the San Francisco National Wildlife Refuge.

"People can leave the urban environment and actually see with their own eyes what they would otherwise only see on the Discovery Channel," he said.

After years of initial work by scientists, local officials and the public, the plan released Wednesday is the final environmental review prepared by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game.

Early efforts over the past few years to open the ponds near Alviso and Hayward to the less salty bay water already have attracted a bonanza of birds. Fish follow the fresher water, and birds follow the fish.

"Within a week of restoring some of the ponds, we had high use by fish-eating birds" such as pelicans, Morris said. The number of visiting waterfowl has more than doubled, and the number of shorebirds has grown even more, he said.

Today's plan favors converting 90 percent of the former ponds to tidal marsh.

Saltwater marsh and mudflats most resemble what the edges of San Francisco Bay were like before the last century of development. About 80 percent of the wetlands were diked or filled, ruining the ecosystems that acted as nurseries for fish and crabs, habitat and feeding grounds for birds and natural filters for pollutants.

Because the salt ponds also have attracted some bird species, scientists are recommending that half of the ponds at first be turned over to marsh. Then, with continued monitoring, managers will convert the rest of the ponds - unless scientific scrutiny shows the restoration has some unintended negative effect.

The planners call it "adaptive management" because they hope to learn from the actions they take.

Some of the restoration projects planned for the former salt ponds:

-- A 2 1/2-mile segment of the Bay Trail will open between Mountain View's Stevens Creek and Sunnyvale for hiking, biking and watching wildlife. Ducks flock there in the winter, and herons and egrets feed year-round. The least terns that breed on the former Alameda Air Station, which environmentalists want to secure for the refuge, bring young there in August to feed and learn how to fish before the winter migration to Mexico.

-- Near Santa Clara and Alviso, managers will open about 900 acres of ponds to the tides, bringing the new tidal marsh there to about 1,400 acres. Brown and white pelicans, ruddy ducks and double-crested cormorants feed there. People walking near about 250 acres of shallow ponds with 50 nesting islands will see American avocets, black-necked stilts and Forster's terns. Thousands of western and least sandpipers, grebes, marbled godwits and dunlins come in the winter.

-- Near Hayward, the agencies will build an interpretive site with raised walkways and viewing platforms overlooking the remnants of old salt works. Birds and ducks will congregate at some 230 acres of ponds and 630 acres of tidal habitat.

In 2003, the state and federal government joined with private foundations to pay \$100 million for 16,500 acres of the ponds owned by Cargill Inc., a giant agribusiness. Of the acreage, 15,100 acres are in the South Bay and are part of this restoration project. The other 1,400 acres are in the North Bay on wildlife refuge land.

Very little of the restoration money is in hand. The funds will be cobbled together from future federal appropriations and grant proposals as well as past voter-approved propositions, money collected as part of development deals and fines levied on bay poachers.

"The money hasn't been officially committed, but we fully believe that the state will provide substantial funding for the restoration from voter-approved bonds," said Steve Ritchie, executive project manager at the state Coastal Conservancy, an agency helping to coordinate the regional plan.

The cost of levee building on the shoreline of San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties is estimated to represent more than half of the \$1 billion, Ritchie said.

Scientists say global warming could cause bay waters to rise more than 2 feet during this century. Levees will be built close to the land, and tidal marsh will stretch out beyond to the bay waters. The levees must be built so that they can be raised as the need arises, planners say.

Without levees, Silicon Valley - including Google, Yahoo, the Moffett Business Park and the community of Alviso - would be among sites under water, according to projections. Flood surges now could inundate property, Ritchie said.

Levees are needed around Menlo Park and East Palo Alto on the bay's west side and Hayward on the bay's east side, according to officials.

At the southern tip of the bay, groundwater pumping for agricultural over past decades has caused land to sink, making the bay's shoreline vulnerable to flooding in Mountain View, Sunnyvale, Santa Clara, Alviso, San Jose and Milpitas.

The agencies involved hope to receive \$4 million in the Interior Department budget, an appropriation proposed by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-San Francisco. The Santa Clara Valley Water and the Alameda Flood Control districts have applied for state bond money, as has the state Coastal Conservancy.

Besides raising the money, project planners must deal with mercury pollution from old mines, preventing the spread of invasive East Coast cordgrass and allowing sediment to fill in sunken areas of the South Bay to keep ahead of the rise in sea level.

### **Online resources**

**Learn more about the south bay salt pond restoration project:**

[www.southbayrestoration.org](http://www.southbayrestoration.org)

### **Want to help?**

Where to call to get involved with the restoration projects. **A14**

### **Get involved**

-- The San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge needs volunteers to give nature talks, paint gates, take photos, landscape and report vandalism, among other jobs. For more information, call (510) 792-0222 ext. 41 or go to [links.sfgate.com/ZBTO](http://links.sfgate.com/ZBTO).

-- The environmental group Save the Bay is managing part of the salt pond restoration at Eden

Landing Ecological Reserve near Hayward. On Jan. 12, volunteers will plant 5,000 native plants, remove trash and pick weeds. Call (510) 452-9261 for more information.

-- Officials will discuss the restoration plan between 1 and 4 p.m. Friday at the Public Affairs Building, Eagle Room, NASA Ames Research Center at Moffett Field. Find out about other meetings at [www.southbayrestoration.org](http://www.southbayrestoration.org).

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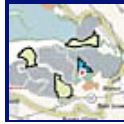
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A great egret (left) and a marbled godwit (center) wade in the waters of the Ravenswood ponds near Menlo Park as other shorebirds take flight. Photo by Kat Wade, special to the Chronicle



Chronicle / Kat Wade

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A salt encrusted area at the west end of the Dumbarton Bridge will be restored to pond habitat. Photo by Kat Wade, special to the Chronicle



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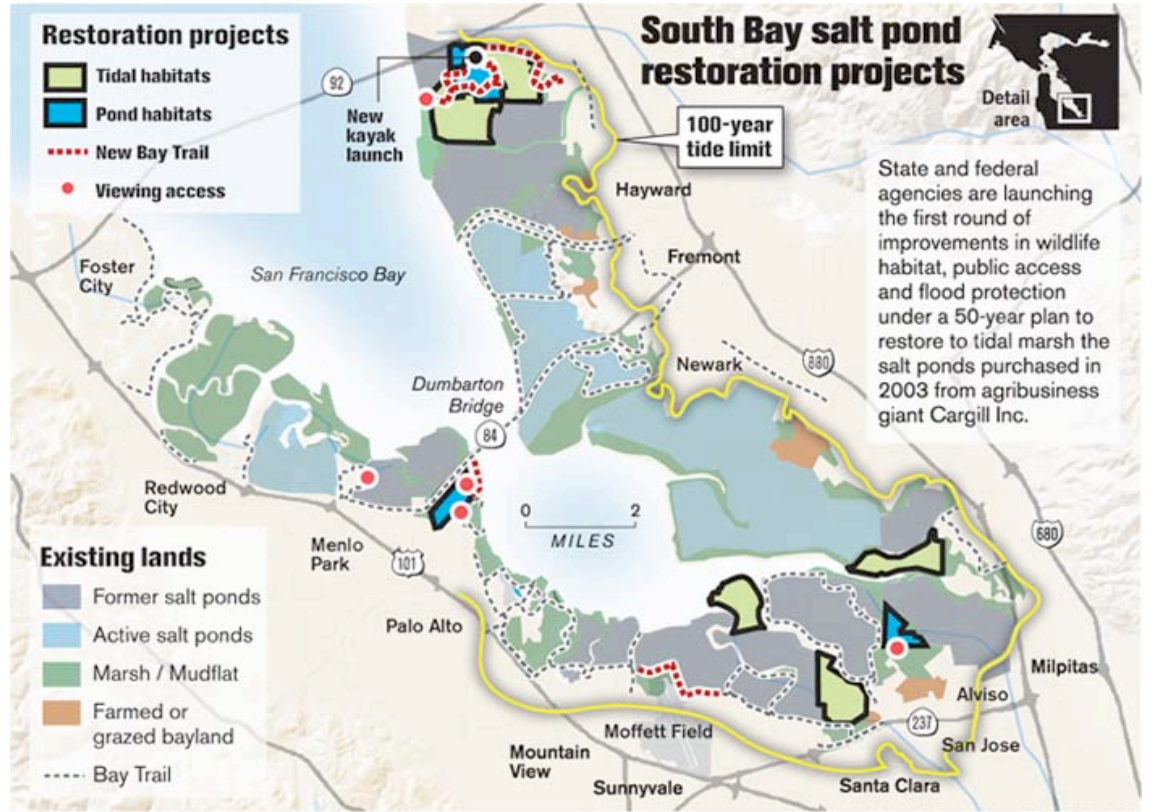
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South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Projects. Chronicle graphic by John Blanchard



Sources: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. ESRI

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