

Invest now for a healthy bay in the future

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Forty years ago, public outcry put a badly needed end to the slow destruction of San Francisco Bay from widespread filling and development. Indeed, the bay as we know it now is a monument to that victory. Today, we have a significant opportunity to build on that legacy and ensure that future generations can enjoy the economic and ecological benefits of the bay. The key lies in making smart investments to restore thousands of acres of salt ponds and diked hay fields to tidal wetlands.

The Bay Area's quality of life and economy depend on a healthy and vibrant bay. This natural treasure defines our region, provides recreation and beauty, and serves as the backbone of our economy. The bay is why many of us choose to live and work here.

The bay's wetlands also play a role in the increasingly important fight against global warming. According to scientists, every acre of restored, healthy salt marsh captures and converts at least 870 kilograms of carbon dioxide into plant material annually - equivalent to the greenhouse gas emissions from driving 2,280 miles.

Yet, unless we make smart investments now to secure a healthy future for the bay, many of these benefits may never be realized. The bay has been drastically altered by mass urbanization, and its wetlands have been diked and drained for farms and salt ponds, or filled for development. Only 5 percent of the bay's original wetlands remain. Restoring more wetlands is vital to support endangered species, filter pollutants from the water, protect communities against flooding and provide open space.

In 1999, scientists created a regional blueprint for restoring bay wetlands, including 100,000 acres of restored tidal marsh at sites where it was still possible. Large shoreline parcels were acquired to pursue this blueprint, from salt ponds in San Jose to hay fields near Petaluma. Although state and federal resource agencies and private foundations have already invested at least \$370 million, a broad, long-term commitment supported by public and private interests is needed to restore the bay.

A new report by Save the Bay - "Greening the Bay" - documents for the first time the total projected cost of these restoration projects, finds strong public willingness to pay that cost and recommends ways to secure the necessary funds.

Over 50 years, \$1.43 billion of investment will be required to fully restore more than 36,000 acres of tidal marsh. That's about \$4 annually per area resident. In a recent EMC Research poll, 83 percent of likely voters said they would be willing to pay \$10 per year in taxes or fees to restore bay wetlands. Support is strong throughout the region and is not limited to individual projects or local priorities. We have the will and the wallet - what we lack is a way to translate this strong regional support into steady funding for restoration of bay wetlands.

"Greening the Bay" recommends the immediate creation of a bay special district to explore and coordinate local and regional public revenue mechanisms. This entity could design fundraising methods that earn voter approval, cultivate private support and develop priorities and sequencing for spending funds on projects within the available acreage.

We also recommend dedicating more funds from future state resources bonds for bay restoration. Only about 1 percent of recent bonds, approximately \$167 million, has been invested in bay restoration, despite its ecological importance and strong voter support for these measures.

And we recommend that Congress increase funding for the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, which contains more than 13,000 acres of major bay wetland restoration projects. The nation's largest urban wildlife preserve, with 700,000 annual visitors, has grown in size and complexity without comparable budget increases for maintenance and protection.

Over the past four decades, Bay Area residents have overcome tremendous odds to prevent the bay from being

destroyed. By developing a long-term bay wetlands restoration plan now, we can make the bay healthier for people and wildlife long into the future.

DAVID LEWIS is executive director of Save the Bay. PETER A. DARBEE is chairman of the board and chief executive officer of PG&E Corp. They wrote this article for the Mercury News. You can read the full report at www.saveSFbay.org/greeningthebay.

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