

Bay restoration at an exciting point

By Sen. Dianne Feinstein

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This month marks a major milestone on the road to recovery for the San Francisco Bay, and the next step in the largest wetlands restoration in California history.

The federal and state governments are releasing details of a multi-generational effort to transform the former Cargill salt ponds into living, breathing, restored tidal wetlands in south San Francisco Bay.

Restoration is more critical now than ever, especially in light of the recent bay oil spill. The bay is precious, and tidal wetlands will make it more resilient.

This effort culminates more than five years of work, stemming from a landmark public-private partnership to purchase more than 16,000 acres of salt ponds along the shores of the bay and the Napa River from Cargill.

I clearly remember standing along the bay in March 2003 to announce the acquisition. I said at the time that I'd like to see the restoration of the salt ponds completed in my lifetime. The good news is that we've already seen substantial movement toward that goal:

- More than 12,000 acres of salt ponds reconnected to the bay.

- A 100 percent increase in waterfowl and a 130 percent increase in shorebirds' use of these ponds.

- Increased fish populations in and around ponds opened to the bay.

- Roughly 500 acres of former ponds already well on their way to returning to tidal marsh, with restoration occurring more quickly than expected. Another 1,760 will be restored in the next three to four years.

Now we're ready to move into the next major phase of restoration.

This plan will create habitat for waterfowl and wildlife, protect the South Bay from flooding, provide trails for biking and hiking, and open up previously off-limits areas of the bay to kayaking and other recreation. Children will have access to nature in the middle of one of the most urbanized areas of the nation.

And this is only the beginning. The plan released earlier this month calls for up to 90 percent of the salt ponds to be restored to tidal marsh. This is key to the survival of endangered bay natives such the clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse. It will also provide important habitat for harbor seals, young steelhead trout, oysters and countless birds that rely on the bay for their winter home.

In addition, restored wetlands and tidal marshes provide benefits to people and the environment. Scientists have known for a long time that they improve water quality, provide flood buffering and offer habitat to a wide range of animals and birds.

And more recently, we've learned that restoration of former wetlands can help in the fight against global warming - by removing carbon from

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the atmosphere. Tidal marsh restoration may be one of the most effective methods available to us for sequestering carbon.

This restoration effort also is an example of what can be accomplished when we forge innovative public-private partnerships. Four private foundations in the Bay Area, the Hewlett, Moore and Packard Foundations and the Goldman Fund, helped fund the acquisition, along with the state and federal governments. I commend and thank these foundations.

The foundations also gave support to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the state Coastal Conservancy with developing the long-term restoration plan and managing the former salt ponds until the plan was complete.

At the same time, the public agencies have led a broad-based collaborative process to plan the future of the former salt ponds. This process has involved scientists with international as well as local expertise, technical consultants, and local stakeholders who met regularly to help shape the design of the project. The agencies also have sponsored numerous public meetings and received and responded to comments on the plan from hundreds of people. This process resulted in the plan being released this month.

Implementing the restoration plan is going to take time and require support from the private as well as the public sector - and, I am committed to doing my part. As chairman of the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, I am working to secure \$4 million for this restoration plan and an additional \$7 million in funding for other restoration efforts.

Every time I fly home and look down over the bay, I

look at the former salt ponds ringing the South Bay. Only a few years ago, they were stained red, pink, and purple. Now when I look down, I see them reconnected to their surroundings, virtually indistinguishable from the bay, and I know we are doing the right thing in restoring them.

It will be exciting to see nature take its course over the next few decades, and I know that by working together we can restore the heart of the bay.

SEN. DIANNE FEINSTEIN, a Democrat, represents California in the U.S. Senate. She wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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