

Extension of the Bay Trail is set to begin

Restoration would expand marsh

By Cody Kraatz
Bay Area News Group

Article Launched: 12/26/2007 03:09:10 PM PST

Federal and state agencies will soon begin converting about 15,000 acres of former Cargill Inc. salt ponds into tidal marsh and public trails, according to a plan officials unveiled on Dec. 14.

The South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project aims to restore 90 percent of that land to tidal marsh by 2050 at a total cost of about \$1 billion, 60 percent of which will go toward levee construction. Plans will evolve based on the results of environmental research.

Besides restoration and preservation, the larger plan calls for increased access for hunters, hikers, bikers and birdwatchers. This first phase is expected to cost \$32 million for construction and environmental studies and to continue into 2010.

"It is very important to the project that we are successful from the flood protection point of view, as well as the habitat point of view, as well as the public access point of view," said executive project manager Steven Ritchie of the state Coastal Conservancy.

The funds will come from out-of-state bond measures allocated for levee construction and wetland restoration, as well as federal monies,

Ritchie said.

Locally, Sunnyvale will gain a 2.5-mile connecting trail that will allow people to walk, run or bike from Sunnyvale Baylands Park to Shoreline at Mountain View Park. Several nearby tidal habitats will be established as well.

The Coastal Conservancy, California Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service jointly manage planning and construction after buying the Cargill land in March 2003 with state, federal and private foundation funds.

"We are going to make sure we provide flood protection and in many cases improve flood protection," said Ritchie, adding that the project will likely adapt in the future to climate change expectations and possible changes in sea level and rainfall patterns.

Many parts of the South Bay closest to the water could be threatened by flooding. The 100-year tide boundary - up to which the bay has a 1 percent chance of flooding once every 100 years - runs through Moffett Field, the Moffett Park area and along Tasman Drive.

"Now with the sea level rising and everything, that could happen more frequently," said Clyde Morris, a refuge manager for the Fish and Wildlife Services in charge of the South Bay part of the project, adding that the current levees are not sufficient. "These are not engineered levees. These are just a bunch of mud."

The Army Corps of Engineers may be brought in for major levee construction down the road.

The connecting trail is part of the San Francisco Bay Trail, which is ultimately intended to ring the bay. It has been held up because of security concerns at

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Moffett Field.

"It's huge. So many people for so many years have been working on the Moffett gap," said Laura Thompson, Bay Trail project manager for the Association of Bay Area Governments, which approved a \$63,250 grant for the trail on Dec. 13.

"For many years [the land for the trail] was owned by Cargill, so there was never an option."

Built atop a low levee, the trail will be open year-round and composed of gravel. It will be rebuilt permanently with asphalt atop a new, much higher levee in 15-20 years, officials said, estimating that it would open next spring.

The public can access the existing Bay Trail spur, which rings a Sunnyvale wastewater treatment pond, and the future trail from a trailhead on Carl Road near Caribbean Drive and Borregas Avenue.

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