

\$1.43 billion tally to fix San Francisco Bay wetlands

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For years, local environmentalists have been dreaming that the old dikes and salt ponds, hay fields and abandoned airfields jutting into the San Francisco Bay would be restored to native wetlands, freeing the tides to rush in once again.

Now, one conservation group leading the charge is putting a price tag on that dream - \$1.43 billion.

A new report released today by Save The Bay also suggests residents in the nine counties that ring the bay are willing to help pay the cost for what's being called one of the most ambitious wetlands restoration projects west of the Mississippi.

"These nine counties each have a small slice of shoreline," said David Lewis, executive director of Save The Bay, whose group is calling for the creation of a special regional taxing district to raise money and manage the projects. "So having some agency that can be regional in scope seems to make more sense."

Reaction from environmental groups and people connected to the restoration projects was predictably enthusiastic about a plan to double tidal wetlands from Vallejo to San Jose. Sen. Dianne Feinstein welcomed a local funding source, and even a prominent business group said Monday it was open to the idea.

The \$1.43 billion would be spent on 36,176 acres around the bay that have already been acquired for restoration, including 13,000 acres of South Bay salt ponds, 1,400 acres along Bair Island, and the Hamilton Army Airfield in Marin County. Already, \$370 million in state, federal and local dollars have been spent to buy the targeted land.

"If you spread it out over 50 years and everybody paid a share, it would be less than \$4 per year per person," Lewis said. "It's a big number, but we think it's an achievable amount over 50 years."

A 2006 poll conducted by EMC Research, on behalf of Save The Bay, found 83 percent of residents polled said they would be willing to pay \$10 per year in taxes or fees to restore the bay's wetlands.

Regional priorities

The report calls for a special district, much like the East Bay Regional Park District, to set wetland restoration priorities and seek funding from local, state and federal sources. The district should have a governing body that may include representatives from key state, regional or local agencies.

Establishing a special district with the ability to collect taxes would require state legislation or a public vote.

Restoring the wetlands would help rebound the populations of the endangered salt marsh harvest mouse and California clapper rail, advocates say. They also say that without levees as barriers, people could get closer to nature.

"In the South Bay, the salt ponds cut off the public from the bay for at least the last 50-plus years," said Steve Ritchie, project manager of the South Bay Salt Ponds Restoration Project. "These are marshes that used to be here teeming with life."

Restoring the wetlands, and creating a special district to help do it, is an idea supported by the Bay Area Council, a collection of 275 chief executives of the area's largest employers.

"It seems trite to say, but a clean environment is one of the most important features you can have in an innovation economy," said John Grubb, the council's spokesman. "We're all in a talent battle. The opportunities that nature provides is one of the draws here - and the reason costs are so high - but you get what you pay for."

Feinstein said in a statement Monday that she welcomes "any mechanism to develop local funding for wetlands restoration."

"I do my level best to get funding for wetlands restoration every year, and I will continue to do so," she said. "But there is only so much federal funding. Wetlands restoration is very costly, and additional federal dollars are very difficult because you have to take it from other projects."

The vanishing bay

Today, the bay has shrunk by one-third of its original size, with only 5 percent of the bay's original wetlands remaining. The destruction of the San Francisco Bay began during the Gold Rush of the 1850s, and by the 1960s, the bay was being filled in at a rate of two square miles per year, according to the report, "Greening The Bay." Marshland was reclaimed for farming, housing and industry.

Over the past century, private companies turned tens of thousands of acres of marsh along the South Bay into industrial salt evaporation ponds bordered by earthen levees to harvest salt for roads, medicine and food. In 2003, the state and federal governments purchased 13,000 acres of salt ponds from Cargill Salt for \$100 million.

"Now, we're reclaiming it for the bay," Lewis said.

Numerous wetlands restorations already are under way, paid for by a combination of sources, including state resource bonds paid by taxpayers for projects across the state.

While shaving down levees to let the tide come and go isn't expensive in itself, protecting developed areas on the shore-side of the levees is costly, Lewis said. A steady funding source is needed, he said.

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