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Bair Island closed up to five years

By Michelle Durand

Fans of the Bair Island trails will be barred from visiting for three to five years because ongoing habitat restoration has turned the former salt pond into a “veritable construction site,” as one million cubic yards of dirt is hauled in to shore up levees and create a tidal wetland.

Up to 200 truckloads of dirt daily are entering the site as well as large pieces of construction equipment — all reasons why all public access is banned until further notice, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

A number of reported vandalism and trespassing incidents also led to the decision announced a few weeks back. The USFWS even reported that pedestrians have ridden all-terrain vehicles through the constructions area and cut through barrier chains.

Dirt hauling began in July and officials wanted to keep some of the site open, even sectioning off a portion of the trails during construction. However, the litany of unsafe practices and illegal acts prompted them to drop the option all together.

Bair Island, a 3,000-acre area in Redwood City, is part of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. The island was diked in the late 1800s for grazing and later converted into salt evaporation ponds. Inner Bair Island contains the trail loop which draws the public.

An estimated 250,000 people visit the island annually to jog, hike and appreciate the wildlife. That quarter-million visitors, however, will have to put their trips on hold temporarily while the USFWS works on improvements.

The current construction is the first renovation phase to return the island to its former wildlife habitat and create new tidal wetlands and trails. Plans also include observation platforms, expanded parking and rest rooms.

To reach the end goal, more than 1 million cubic yards of dirt will raise the island’s level and shore up levees. The dirt comes from a number of sources, according to the USFWS, and all is monitored to ensure it is clean. Officials are hopeful they can use land from the dredging of the Redwood City port’s channel.

Once complete, wildlife officials expect the repaired habitat to house a number of species including the endangered California clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse.

Michelle Durand can be reached by e-mail: michelle@smdailyjournal.com or by phone: (650) 344-5200 ext. 102.

Info box: More project information is available at www.fws.gov/desfbay or calling 530-668-5667. Updates on periodic weekend openings are at www.redwoodcity.org/bair