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Bair Island restoration plan in full swing

By Elizabeth Pfeffer

Restoration is finally within reach at embattled Bair Island, a former tidal marsh in Redwood City that endured 100 years of human tampering before gaining federal protection.

Human use of the 2,600-acre wildlife refuge dates back to the late 1800s when farmers diked its marshes for grazing.

"It totally converted the habitat from the original salt marsh to an agricultural habitat that was managed," said John Bradley, deputy project leader for the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

In subsequent years it was neglected, drained and turned into saltwater evaporation ponds.

Today Bair Island, which is actually made up of three separate islands, is stewarded by the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, one of the San Francisco Bay complex's seven refuges. It was donated by the Peninsula Open Space Trust after they purchased it from a company whose housing development plans were nixed by residents in 1982.

As of Aug. 28, a final environmental impact report was approved for tentative plans to return the area to its natural state of tidal wetlands. This will be accomplished by breaking through old man-made levees and allowing the marshes to once again be inundated by the Bay's tides.

"By restoring we're hoping that natural processes will lay down sufficient sediment layers and the tide will carry the seeds, so natural vegetation will begin growing," Bradley said.

The refuge has secured \$1.2 million to have engineering drawings drafted — the first step in seeing the long-awaited project materialize.

"It's going to be a restoration of acres of levee that is now predominately in the condition left by humans 40 years ago," Bradley said.

When the 1,400-acre restoration is complete, what is now a drab brown landscape, should become lush, green scenery for people and wildlife to enjoy.

A concrete timeline is not in place yet, but Bradley estimated the entire undertaking could take up to 15 years from start to finish.

"People are basically jogging around a brown hole," Save the Bay Executive Director David Lewis said of the pedestrian trail on Inner Bair Island located at the end of Whipple Road.

After the restoration more opportunities for recreation such as hiking and bird watching will be available.

As of now, appropriations for funding by the federal government are still in progress, with all 11 regional members of congress giving their full support, as well as local companies such as Pacific Gas & Electric and Oracle, which participated in corporate volunteer days.

If Proposition 84 is passed in November, there will be potential for state funding as well, Lewis said.



Kirstina Sangsahachart/Daily Journal
Walkers enjoy the scenic views of Bair Island. The former tidal marsh in Redwood City is in the midst of a plan to bring it back to its former condition.

The \$5 billion resources bond has a category for San Francisco Bay restoration which could garner some money for Bair Island.

Save the Bay, in conjunction with the Edwards refuge and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, was involved with the planning for several years in fundraising and volunteering capacities.

The organization holds monthly volunteer dates where individuals or groups can help remove weeds and test seeds by canoe — the only way to reach Middle and Outer Bair Island.

The next date is on Sept. 16.

In the past couple of years 450 volunteers have removed more than 20,000 pounds of ice plants, an invasive non-native species.

“We’re the vanguard of actual restoration,” Lewis said.

The Edwards refuge handles more expensive tasks such as major construction, carving levees to fit the natural template for the historical tide pools and depositing fill materials.

Save the Bay provides volunteer manpower which the refuge couldn’t muster up funding to contract out, Lewis said.

“We can mobilize volunteers for a fraction of the cost.”

And cost has been an issue from the get-go.

The total price of the restoration is estimated at about \$10 million, which is a drastic decrease from the \$25 million figure from two years ago.

One of the ways they will cut costs is to recycle clean dredge from local rivers that would otherwise be dumped out in the ocean. The dredge will be used to make the deeper, eroded sections of Bair Island shallower.

By reviving the tidal wetlands, which once covered most of the Bay Area, it will create a whole new food chain that is naturally designed to thrive in the Bay’s ecosystem.

“The San Francisco Bay is one of the jewels of the world and having a healthy bay is the foundation of that,” Bradley said.

Box info:

Coastal Cleanup Day Paddle at Bair Island

Saturday, September 16, 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Canoe around Bair Island and help Save The Bay remove debris while exploring the tidal marsh ecosystem on the 22nd annual Coastal Cleanup Day. Save The Bay educators will lead the paddle and clean-up project and will provide all the necessary canoeing and safety equipment.

Members: \$25

Non-members: \$35

Minimum Age: 10, children ages 10-12 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian

Site Partner: Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge

To sign up visit: www.saveSFbay.org