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Trio of small isles to be reborn as tidal wetlands

Decades after nearby residents saved a San Francisco Bay site at the ballot box, its restoration is to begin

By Herbert A. Sample -- Bee San Francisco Bureau
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REDWOOD CITY -- Nearly a quarter-century ago, a group of this town's residents challenged local politicians, business groups and a big oil company that wanted to build scores of homes on Bair Island.

The residents, knowing the island in former salt ponds was one of the last remaining intact wetlands in San Francisco Bay, fought the development at the ballot box and narrowly won. Now comes time for their reward.

In the coming weeks, dozens of trucks will begin hauling in loads of dirt, marking the start of Bair Island's restoration.

Actually a grouping of three isles separated by sloughs, the 3,000-acre Bair Island will return to what it once was: a thriving saltwater marsh and a protected home for birds, fish, animals, plants -- even a harbor seal or two.

The \$10 million project, overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, also will serve as an incubator of ideas on how to restore a much larger collection of salt ponds once owned by Cargill Inc. in the southern San Francisco Bay.

"I am very pleased and enthusiastic," said Ralph Nobles, who led Friends of Redwood City in its 1982 campaign against the housing development and since has yearned to see the island's restoration begin.

"It's been so long," said Nobles, a retired research physicist. "It's time the recovery started."

The Bair Island and Cargill projects are two of several efforts around the state to arrest the loss of wetlands. California, worst in the nation, has destroyed about 90 percent of its wetlands, which serve as wildlife habitat and, in the case of those in the San Francisco Bay, help improve water quality.

It has been a long, long time since Bair Island did either.

The parcel was diked more than a century ago for agricultural and grazing purposes. Right after World War II and until 1965, it was a salt pond.

In the early 1980s, a subsidiary of Mobil Oil Co. wanted to build housing on the site, much as the firm had done on another patch of former wetlands just northwest of Bair Island, a project called Redwood Shores. The Redwood City City Council unanimously endorsed the Mobil Oil project.

That's when Nobles and his group stepped in. They collected enough signatures on a petition to place a referendum on the ballot, and won by a dozen or so votes. "No one thought we had a ghost of a chance," Nobles said.

The island subsequently was sold to a series of developers, the last being a Japanese firm that Nobles and allies pressured to sell to the Peninsula Open Space Trust, which buys land in the area for preservation. The trust later donated Bair Island to the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National

Wildlife Refuge.

Restoration on 1,400 acres of the island calls for placing 1 million cubic yards of dirt and dredge material from Redwood City's adjacent port onto portions of the isles, which in places have sunk by as much as 2 feet. Wave action on the outer isle has already cracked some levees; others will be breached intentionally.

The innermost isle, the only one accessible by foot, will continue to be open to visitors. Observation stands will be built so wildlife enthusiasts can watch the goings-on.

"This is a place to bring people to connect with wildlife," said Clyde Morris, manager for the Edwards refuge and an avid bird-watcher.

On the innermost isle, known as Inner Bair Island, signs abound of nature bouncing back. Grindelia, a green plant with small yellow flowers loved by endangered California clapper rails and salt marsh harvest mice, have staked out territory here and there. Harbor seals swimming in Smith Slough warily keep their distance.

A looming problem Morris may have to address: dogs and their owners. Many nearby residents walk their dogs on the three-mile path that surrounds Inner Bair Island. Too often, the dogs run off the path, and some owners don't clean up after them.

"It's unbelievable the amount of stuff out there," said Kathy Grossi, who had just walked Rio, her English springer spaniel. "The majority of dog owners are responsible. It's the few who wreck it for everybody."

New rules soon will be instituted requiring maximum 6-foot leashes and poop collection. Even if only a small percentage of owners don't comply, all dogs will be banned, Morris said.

"It's a balance that I do," he added, noting that Bair Island is meant to be a safe refuge for wildlife that people can observe, not a play yard for dogs.

The Bair Island restoration will help cultivate ideas for the remaking of 15,100 acres of former Cargill salt ponds in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties, and 1,400 acres in Napa County.

David Lewis, executive director of the environmental group Save the Bay, said Bair Island's visibility from nearby Highway 101 also will assist the Cargill project.

"I think it will actually create a momentum, or continue momentum, for the larger salt pond restoration, because people will actually be able to see some brown areas turning to green at Bair Island," Lewis said.

If all goes well, Morris expects Bair Island to return to its natural state in a couple of decades.

Nobles, now 86, hopes to see some of the progress and wishes his deceased wife, Carolyn, could have seen it as well.

"Every time we drove on (Highway) 101 and we saw that island, we thought, 'That is our monument. We had a hand in that,'" he said. "We are just so proud of it."

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