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Bair Island repairs to begin

Daily Journal staff report

The much-anticipated environmental restoration of inner Bair Island in Redwood City will begin this week and it means partial closures of popular hiking trails.

Trucks will start delivering an estimated 1 million cubic yards of dirt to raise the level of the island — the first step in its restoration to a natural tidal wetland. As this dirt fill is delivered, there will be periodic temporary closures of the popular loop trail on the island. Trail closures will generally occur during weekdays only and usually will allow for the trail to be open to the public during the early morning and early evening hours. The trail will likely remain fully open to the public on weekends, according to a Redwood City press release Monday.

Due to the sheer volume of the fill material to be delivered to the site, the trucking in of dirt is expected to continue for an estimated three to five years. For the public safety, visitors are urged to respect the trail closure periods and stay away from any trucks or equipment that may be on the site, according to the release.

Bair Island is a 3,000-acre portion of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge and an estimated 250,000 people visit annually. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is undertaking the restoration of about 1,400 acres of Bair Island, to return it to its natural condition as tidal wetlands — a recovery from its historic human use as grazing lands and salt evaporation ponds. The restoration of this ecological treasure will help renew natural vegetation, protect critical wildlife habitat and endangered species, reduce mosquito breeding and offer revitalized public access and renewed opportunities for environmental education, according to the release.

Some of the dirt used to raise the inner island is mud dredge from the nearby Port of Redwood City.

The dredging process essentially involves applying a giant vacuum cleaner to the bottom of the shallowest part of the channel. The regular process gets rid of about a foot of mud so that incoming ships can reach the port — but usually the mud is dumped on an out-of-state site by the U.S. government.

Raising the island with Bay mud, coupled with the opening of a levee that will allow water and sediment to flow through from the Bay to the island, will result in a much better living environment. The restored marshes would also soak up water better, serving as natural flood control.

The restoration project has been being planned for the past three years. Project volunteers will also enhance the island's parking, improve walking trails and build a bridge from the outskirts to a trail at the center of the island.