

Access to Bair Island expected to end today

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REDWOOD CITY — The popular hiking trails on Redwood City's Bair Island will be closed to the public indefinitely after officials working to restore the wetlands said people were acting unsafely around dirt-moving equipment.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials say visitors have been venturing off trails and walking or riding bikes dangerously close to bulldozers and trucks. They also reported instances of residents threatening gatekeepers, and even of people riding all-terrain vehicles on the federally protected preserve.

Enough is enough for the federal officials, who decided to shut down a three-mile hiking trail on part of the 3,000-acre island for at least a month or two as heavy dirt moving ramps up. The closure was expected to begin today.

The work will bring 1 million cubic yards of dirt to the island over the next three to five years as officials try to raise the elevation of the island. Eventually, the levees holding the tidal water from the Bay will be strategically breached, allowing saltwater to flow into Bair Island for the first time since the 19th century, when it was diked for salt harvesting and livestock grazing.

Officials had hoped to keep the trails open as long as possible for the estimated 250,000 people who visit Bair Island annually.

"Unfortunately, certain members of the public — and this always happens — have not been using it safely," said Clyde Morris, manager of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, which includes Bair Island.

Morris said the high volume of work currently going on the addition of up to 200 truckloads of dirt per day — necessitated the closure. He said workers would be handing out fliers notifying people of the potential trespassing penalties for ignoring the order.

He said the trails would be reopened as soon as the heavy dirt moving stops for the year, likely when the rainy season begins.

In recent weeks, workers have been constructing a containment dike with dirt from local construction sites to help with dredging of nearby Redwood Creek sometime next year. Removing that silt from the bottom of the channel serving the Port of Redwood City will allow for ships to continue to use the passage — an economic benefit for the city — and will also bring large volumes of dirt to Bair, Morris said.

Environmental groups have cheered the effort, which they hope will renew native vegetation and provide a larger habitat for local species, including the endangered California clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse.

Ironically, the overall project is intended to allow more people to visit a greater portion of the refuge, Morris said.

Redwood City police have not received any complaints about activity in the area in the past few weeks but are aware of the problems reported by Fish and Wildlife, said Capt. Chris Cesena.

Restoration efforts on Middle Bair Island will not be affected by the closure of the trails and the dirt work, which is concentrated on Inner Bair, said Marilyn Latta, habitat restoration director for Save the Bay.

For more information, visit <http://www.redwoodcity.org/bair> or <http://www.fws.gov/desfbay>.

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