

The Almanac

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6,000 acres of county salt ponds face a new future

Cargill is planning to develop 1,433 acres between Redwood City and Menlo Park; Bair Island and Menlo Park ponds will be restored as tidal marsh and managed ponds.

by Marion Softky

You only have to go to Bayfront Park in Menlo Park to get a feel for the past, present, and several possible futures for our corner of San Francisco Bay.

The summit of the former Marsh Road dump — once not-so-fondly called Mt. Trashmore — gives a rare view of the sweep of marsh, sloughs, salt ponds and developments that cushion our communities from the open waters of the Bay.

To the north, Greco Island is a green sliver remaining from the tidal marshes that once ringed the Bay before most were diked and filled. "We've destroyed 95 percent of the Bay's original wetlands," says David Lewis, executive director of the conservation organization, Save The Bay. "We have a chance to get some of them back."

On the east and west of Bayfront Park, salt ponds stretch out flat and white for thousands of acres toward Redwood City and the Dumbarton Bridge.

These salt ponds seem headed for different futures, as Cargill pulls back from its historic salt making. Not too long ago, the giant company managed some 40,000 acres of ponds where Bay water evaporated; it moved from pond to pond, gradually concentrating salt that was harvested in Newark and Redwood City.

East of Bayfront Park, 1,600 acres of salt ponds in Menlo Park are in the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. They are planned for restoration as tidal marsh and managed ponds as part of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, the largest restoration project on the West Coast. This started in 2003, when Cargill sold salt-making rights for 16,500 acres of salt ponds in the North and South Bay to the federal government for \$100 million. It retained 9,000 acres in the East Bay for salt production and 2.2 square miles in Redwood City for development.

West of Bayfront Park, 1,433 acres of ponds in Redwood City, extending to Seaport Boulevard, are still owned by Cargill, which is planning a mixed-use development. It is going through an elaborate planning process to engage Redwood City residents in deciding what housing, transportation, wetlands, recreation and other uses they want on the Bayfront property.

The salt ponds around the Bay remain key to the dream of restoring San Francisco Bay to some of its original richness. While salt ponds block tides and replace natural greenery, they also remain as open water. They support birds and many kinds of wildlife. They are not cities or airports that are there to stay.

"Salt making saved us from ourselves. Cargill kept (the ponds) from being developed," says Steve Ritchie, director of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, on a tour of salt projects visible from Bayfront Park in Menlo Park.

The giant project to restore 15,100 acres of former salt ponds in the South Bay could take 50 years to fully meet its goals of restoring a mix of wetland habitats, managing flooding, and providing public access and recreation.

In San Mateo County, some 6,000 acres of former salt ponds are in transition to new uses. They include: the Ravenswood section of the salt pond restoration project in Menlo Park; Cargill's Redwood City Industrial Saltworks; and Bair Island, 3,000 acres of the wildlife refuge at the end of Whipple Avenue in Redwood City.

Bair Island is already in the process of restoration. In 1982, a proposal to develop Bair Island into a community like Redwood Shores was killed in a referendum led by Ralph Nobles and his group. The Peninsula Open Space Trust bought it from a Japanese developer in 1997. With the help of Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Menlo Park, and the California congressional delegation, it was purchased by the federal government and added to the refuge.

Looming over all the plans for development and restoration is the rise in seal level that is widely predicted and increasingly planned for.

Marshes provide a good defense against rising water — if it doesn't happen too fast, say the restoration advocates. "Tidal marsh is a good defense against global warming," says Mr. Ritchie. "Tidal marsh is efficient at capturing sediment. It builds land as the water rises."

Redwood City Industrial Saltworks: the big question

Standing in the middle of the Cargill salt ponds in Redwood City, it's hard to imagine either future being pushed for this 2.2 square miles of moonscape after salt production winds down. Grey granular salt beds stretch flat into the distance where you can see the modern towers of Pacific Shores or, barely, the brown hills of Bayfront Park.

Cargill and its partner, DMB Associates, want to develop the property for a mixture of uses including housing, recreation and wetlands. DMB, a real estate company based in Arizona, is carrying out an elaborate outreach process to come up with a mix of uses that will meet the desires of Redwood City residents — and be proof against a potential referendum by opponents.

Bay advocates want to see the soon-to-be-abandoned salt ponds restored to the Bay for marsh and wetlands. They note that the area is included in the boundaries of the wildlife refuge as authorized by Congress.

The marshy area along Redwood City's Bayfront was first diked for salt production in 1901. Now it takes five years for Bay water to move through salt ponds at increasing salinity and brighter pinks, until it reaches the pickle ponds and crystallizers at Redwood City, where the salt is harvested.

With no refinery, the Redwood City saltworks make raw salt for industry and the salt that goes on highways to melt snow. It also trucks raw salt to the refinery at Newark. "We make all the salt for the western U.S.," says Penny Streff, land project manager for Cargill.

DMB Associates will present results from the first 14 months of community outreach at a "Milestone Event" on Saturday, Aug. 25, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., at Pacific Shores cafeteria, 1600 Seaport Boulevard in Redwood City.

The outreach process has engaged more than 6,000 people, says John Bruno, general manager for DMB Associates. It included a letter to all homes in Redwood City; five community forums on topics ranging from housing and recreation to open space and sustainability; and open houses and meetings with community groups.

Jay Reed, communications manager for DMB, reports that most people are enthusiastic about development on the site that can address needs for housing, recreation, transportation and open space.

"The vast majority of Redwood City residents want a mixture of uses on the site, including wetlands restoration," Mr. Reed says. "People like the idea of the site hosting a variety of uses. It could include retail and commercial and offices. A lot of people want a public golf course."

For the next phase, DMB will host several public workshops this fall and into next year to consider actual plans for the site. "We don't have a timetable," Mr. Reed says.

Whatever plans DMB finally presents to Redwood City will then face the meat-grinder of the city's public approval process, with hearings galore before the Planning Commission and City Council. Permits may also be required from the regional Bay Conservation and Development Commission.

Meanwhile, Redwood City will be starting to review its general plan late this year or early next year. The Cargill land is now zoned tidal plain/open space. About one-third of the land, close to Seaport Boulevard, is designated urban reserve in the general plan; the rest is shown as open space.

What about sea level rise?

"Our levees would have to meet state requirements," Mr. Reed replies.

For Mr. Nobles, this is one more reason the land should not be developed. "This land is important wildlife habitat which should be restored to the Bay," he says. "It will protect Redwood City if future sea levels rise. When sea level rises, wetlands grow and rise with it."

Can the salt ponds actually be restored?

Mr. Nobles cites an example just across the Dumbarton Bridge, where the LaRiviere Marsh used to be crystallizer ponds similar to the local ones. "All they did was open the dike and let the tides flood in, and it restored itself," he said. "Redwood City would have the same thing in 10 years."

Ravenswood Ponds: laboratory for restoration

Standing on an overlook at Bayfront Park, Steve Ritchie gestures at the sinuous channels that can still be seen within the crusted expanse of salt ponds waiting to be restored to natural wetlands.

"They show the shape of the natural marsh that is waiting to be woken up," he says. "I think of Sleeping Beauty."

The overlook, at the northeast corner of the city park, gives two contrasting views. To the north lies Greco Island, a remnant scrap of the natural marsh that used to surround the Bay. It is still pristine and home to endangered species such as clapper rails and the salt marsh harvest mouse.

To the east lie 1,600 acres of recovering salt ponds that make up the Ravenswood area of the 15,100-acre restoration project that Mr. Ritchie is managing. If all goes well — and if funding holds up — these may slowly become more like Greco Island over the next 30 years.

The first phase includes two projects in the Ravenswood Area that will give local people opportunities to watch the restoration as it unfolds over decades.

Within the next two years, a viewing area will be built in Bayfront Park on the knoll overlooking the salt ponds so that people can watch and understand as the adjacent pond, R4, slowly converts from white and bare to green and verdant marsh.

Meanwhile, Mr. Morris says that endangered snowy plovers are nesting on the dry salt crackle of the ponds. These are the birds that like to nest on bare beaches, where they are exposed to dogs and kids and beach ball players. There are none of those on the salt flats.

One of the big questions to be worked out is the future balance between the salt ponds that are returned to marsh, and those that are retained as managed ponds, because so many shore birds have adapted to life on the ponds. The outer ponds, R1 and R4, will be restored to tidal marsh, Mr. Ritchie says. The inner ponds may remain as managed ponds.

The other local Phase 1 project will allow the public to watch a living experiment on how to manage ponds to encourage different kinds of birds. Pond SF2, a 240-acre area just south of the Dumbarton Bridge approach, will become a public laboratory. "SF2 is one of our most important ponds," says Mr. Morris. "We'll be doing experiments in front of everybody on the Peninsula."

SF2, which has just been turned over to the refuge after lead shot from its years adjacent to a gun club was cleaned up,

will be divided into four cells of varying depths to suit different birds. Little hummocks will be installed for nesting, and there will be a trail and two viewing platforms for the public. "We'll give a push, and nature will take its course," Mr. Ritchie says.

Besides restoration and public access, the salt pond project must take flood control into account. Nothing can be done that might increase flooding until the Army Corps of Engineers has completed its analysis of the potential for flooding nearby shoreline areas, Mr. Ritchie says.

In the Ravenswood Area, the Corps is working through the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority (JPA), where it has a project to study flooding in the creek and nearby tidal areas.

The Corps is now surveying the levees and collecting baseline data, says Kevin Murray, project manager for the JPA. That phase should be finished in 2008, with designing and actual projects coming later.

Key to protecting shoreline development from flooding will be rebuilding and possibly raising the levee along Bayfront Expressway, Mr. Murray says. Actually, "it's just raised ground, it's not an engineered levee.

"If everything goes as hoped, they could design and build a levee in 2010-2011," he says. "That is our hope."

Meanwhile, Mr. Morris looks forward to the day when new salt marsh will improve the cleanliness and health of the Bay and its shoreline. "Salt marshes are the kidneys of the Bay; salt marshes clean pollution," he says. "Some day people can start eating the fish they catch in San Francisco Bay."

Bair Island: still years to go

Bair Island — actually, it's a complex of three islands and several sloughs — is farther along toward full restoration to active marsh and habitat than other former salt pond areas in San Mateo County.

Dump trucks from construction sites around the county are heading east on Whipple Avenue to deposit their loads behind the levees on Inner Bair Island. Clyde Morris, director of the 30,000-acre National Wildlife Refuge, still needs a million cubic yards of clean fill to raise the old salt pond, which has sunk 2-1/2 feet, to a level where it will become marsh and not a lake, before the levee is breached. A lake would not be good there, Mr. Morris says; it would encourage birds to congregate in the approaches to the San Carlos Airport.

"A million cubic yards is a lot of dirt," Mr. Morris says in his office at the refuge headquarters in Newark. He is also getting fill from dredging of Redwood Creek. "Three to five years. That's my goal."

Mr. Morris describes the challenges of undoing the effects of a century of farming and 20 years of salt production on what was once a natural expanse of marsh and mudflat. "We don't want to restore the entire 3,000 acres to tidal action. We need a diversity of habitats," he says.

The program calls for restoring 1,400 acres of former salt ponds on Inner, Middle and Outer Bair Island to tidal action. But before breaching the levees, the refuge has hired the county Mosquito Abatement District to get rid of an invasive Eastern cord grass that threatens to choke the area. The district is attacking the spartina grass by helicopter and boat. "Spartina is really bad; it degrades existing habitat," Mr. Morris says. "If habitat gets taken over by exotic species, what good have you done?"

Meanwhile, volunteer groups organized by Save The Bay regularly paddle canoes out to Inner Bair Island to pull up exotic ice pant in summer, and plant natives in winter.

Outer Bair Island is pretty well taking care of itself, Mr. Morris says. The levees have deteriorated over the years and let tides in. He is pleased that dredging spoils from Redwood Creek near the Port of Redwood City that got dumped on the outer island have created some upland habitat. "We have herons and egrets nesting in the shrubs," he says.

Restoring historic sloughs also involves complex hydrology to control tidal currents — and not wash away the boats

in Pete's Harbor, Mr. Morris notes.

Final plans call for closing the present jogging trail around Inner Bair Island from the end of Whipple Avenue. A new parking lot near Pete's Harbor will give public access to new trails and viewing platforms via a new bridge. "We're designing the bridge to be predator-resistant," Mr. Morris says.

"When we re-establish tidal action, there should be better recreational boating and fishing," Mr. Morris adds.

"And as sea level rises, we expect sediment to be captured by the marsh," he continues. "But there's no certainty. If the scientists are wrong, we lose."

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For more information

- DMB Associates, which is partnering with Cargill to develop the Cargill salt ponds in Redwood City. will hold an open house on Saturday, Aug. 25, to present results from the first 14 months of its community outreach regarding possible development of the lands The event will be held from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., at Pacific Shores cafeteria, 1600 Seaport Boulevard in Redwood City. For information, call Redwod City Industrial Saltworks at 366-0500 or go to <http://www.rcsaltworks.com> .
- Save The Bay offers occasional canoe trips for volunteers to work on Bair Island pulling up ice plant or planting natives. For information, call 510-452-9261; or go to <http://www.savesfbay.org> .
- The South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project has a number of working groups that people can join. Go to <http://www.southbayrestoration.org> .
- For information on the Ravenswood Working Group, call Anna Schneider of the California Coastal Conservancy, at 510-286-0325.

Other organizations and agencies involved with salt ponds include:

- Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, 510-792-0222; <http://www.fws.gov/desfbay> .
- San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority, 330-6765.

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