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Bay Salt Ponds Turning Back Into Tidal Marshes



Tony Russomanno (http://cbs5.com/bios/local_bio_288150511.html)
Reporting

(CBS 5) Bay Area air travelers are about to lose a familiar landmark. And Senator Dianne Feinstein is among those celebrating. "How many of you have flown in and seen these big orange ponds as you come in?" said Sen. Feinstein. "Well, they're all going to be gone."

The brightly colored ponds along the edges of the South and North bay are where the Cargill Corporation makes salt through evaporation.

"As the water evaporates, it gets saltier and saltier," said filmmaker Judy Irving. "And pink brine shrimp happen to like very salty water."

Irving is documenting the largest habitat restoration project on the West Coast - the return of 16 thousand acres of salt ponds that Cargill no longer needs - to natural tidal marshes.

In just three years, the restoration brought a 133% increase in the number of migratory birds.

The endangered California clapper rail has found more of its natural habitat. The snowy plover, another threatened species, is able to build more nests.

Snowy plover chicks thrive at the water's edge, protected by their own natural camouflage that now matches the restored marsh's color.

Most of the former salt ponds have to be opened slowly and carefully. Valves and gates allow fresh water to circulate, while maintaining the flood control that the diked ponds provide.

The ponds' levees protect Alviso, which is below sea level due to ground water pumping.

But this month, a milestone occurred when levees were breached around three salt ponds, opening them to uncontrolled tidal waters for the first time in 60 years.

"All the other levees, if we were to breach them," said Marge Kolar of the US Fish & Wildlife Service, "we would have the potential for flooding some of the urban areas, and these were not."

Senator Feinstein led the effort to buy the ponds for 100 million dollars, with money from private foundations and the government.

Feinstein says she expects the restoration will be completed within her lifetime.

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