

## 'Renaissance of the bay' continues with restoration of 330-acre former salt pond off Alviso

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On Friday afternoon, at a remote spot along the levees on San Francisco Bay's southern edges, a small army of bulldozers, cranes and dump trucks clanked and rolled and dug.

Their job was elegant and noteworthy: To open a former industrial salt pond two miles north of Alviso back to bay waters for the first time since the 1940s, restoring an area the size of 250 football fields to tidal marshes for birds, fish and other wildlife that once dominated the landscape.

Graceful as the goals might have been, the reality was far messier.

Crews in hard hats scooped, pushed and shoveled vast piles of dripping, gray-black ooze with their machinery. The muddy clay, with a consistency of oatmeal, was dug from levees where it had been entombed since Franklin D. Roosevelt was president. For the first time in nearly 70 years, the muck was exposed to the sunlight -- producing thousands of tons of sticky, soupy earthen lava that caked immediately onto boots, tires and anything

else that touched it.

"It's all bay mud," said John Bourgeois, manager of the South Bay Salt Restoration Project, as he trudged along the levees. "You can see the difficulty working out here."

### Ceremony on Monday

Monday, the project to reshape the former Cargill Salt pond known as A6 will come to completion with a ceremony sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Coastal Conservancy.

Two huge "amphibious

excavators" -- essentially giant cranes that float, brought in from the swamps of Louisiana -- will tear through four spots in the levee, allowing bay waters to rush into restored channels and sloughs.

"The first few years, it will look like a lake. Then, you'll start to see vegetation popping up," said Austin Payne, regional engineer with Ducks Unlimited, which is helping manage the project. "And as more sediment starts to come in, it will look like a marsh."

Within five or 10 years, biologists expect, this area where Coyote Creek and Guadalupe Slough empty into the open bay should be teeming with herons, egrets, ducks, salmon, even sturgeon.

"In the summer, it looks like the surface of the moon," Payne said. "For me, it's very exciting to come from nothing to this."

The \$897,000 project, funded by federal stimulus money, is part of a larger effort to restore 20 miles of Cargill Salt ponds that line the South Bay shoreline from Hayward to San Jose to Redwood City back to natural conditions. It's the largest wetlands

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restoration on the West Coast, on par with efforts to restore the Everglades and coastal Louisiana.

In 2003, the federal and state governments spent \$100 million to buy 16,500 acres from Cargill Salt, based in Newark. The goal: to turn back the clock a century and re-establish healthy marshes for wildlife, along with new trails for hikers, schoolchildren and bicyclists.

## Wildlife responding

By the end of this year, roughly 20 former Cargill salt ponds that make up 3,081 acres in the South Bay and 1,400 acres in the North Bay near Napa will have been restored to tidal marsh, configured into shallow ponds for shorebirds, or be under construction.

That total of nearly 4,500 acres represents more than a quarter of the entire, massive Cargill transformation. Another 600 acres off Alviso and Hayward are set to be restored by 2012.

Wildlife is responding well in the early ponds, particularly three known as the "island ponds" near Alviso that were breached in 2006.

"We're seeing thousands of birds there," Bourgeois said. "At low tide, there are areas absolutely loaded with terns, herons, egrets, mallards and pelicans."

Still, serious hurdles remain.

The entire 50-year salt pond restoration project is estimated to cost \$1 billion, and government funding is expected to become more difficult in the coming years. Some ponds have mercury in the sediments that must be carefully monitored. Other areas can't be restored until the Army Corps of Engineers strengthens inner levees to protect against flooding.

And Friday's pond has been a favorite breeding spot for California gulls, which feed on garbage from Newby Island Landfill in Milpitas and kill shorebirds. Nobody knows where they will go after their hangout -- mostly dry in the summer -- is flooded four feet deep on Monday.

Nevertheless, as he scraped thick black mud from his boots Friday, Bourgeois smiled.

"We're very pleased with where we are," he said. "We are witnessing the renaissance of the bay."

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