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Restore marshes, but with caution

As David Lewis and Laura Thompson noted, a massive partnership to reclaim parts of South San Francisco Bay from decades of salt production is an opportunity to create thousands of acres of tidal marsh habitat and expand recreational opportunities (Op-Ed, April 4).

But there's a third compelling benefit of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project and its companion examination, the South San Francisco Bay Shoreline Study: tidal flood protection.

Not unlike some Gulf Coast communities, many South Bay communities situated near salt ponds are low-lying. That's especially true in Santa Clara County where some areas are as much as 10 feet below sea level.

Salt ponds were built with non-engineered levees to isolate salt-producing ponds from the surrounding bay. They weren't designed to protect shoreline communities from flooding, but they've provided de facto protection from tidal flooding for decades.

Restoring the ponds to tidal wetlands will require breaching many of these levees, which will likely increase the risk of inland flooding unless a long-term, effective flood protection solution is implemented. Flood protection is not only vital to restoring habitat but, in some areas, will have to be implemented before restoration can occur.

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