

Feds release endangered species recovery plan for San Francisco Bay marshes

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The shores of the San Francisco Bay for more than 100 years were diked, filled, built on, converted to industrial salt ponds and used as sites for landfills and sewer outfalls.

That was before environmental laws passed in the 1970s.

On Wednesday, the federal government released the latest plan to offset the damage and establish a healthier ecosystem for the plants and animals relying on the marsh areas.

The 50-year plan is being billed as a tidal marsh recovery effort so large it is second only to the restoration efforts in the Florida Everglades begun in the 1990s. In reality, whether that happens will depend on funding and popular will, because the draft recovery plan has no teeth and no dedicated money.

But it does provide a blueprint for recovering endangered California clapper rails, salt marsh harvest mice, four protected plant species and nearly a dozen other plants and animals that are not yet considered threatened or endangered but could be soon.

"Many of the species that are here are perilously close to disappearing," said Valary Bloom, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist.

Bloom spoke in LaRiviere Marsh, a former industrial salt pond near Newark that is now part of the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge, where a snowy egret perched on decrepit wooden structures used during salt production days.

The plan addresses endangered species in all of central and northern California's tidal marshes, from Humboldt Bay to Morro Bay. Along California's steep and rocky coast, however, the bulk of the marshes are inside the Golden Gate. The plan's boundaries extend up to Suisun Bay near Antioch.

Restoring imperiled plants and animals to healthy populations involves acquiring and restoring tidal marshes and addressing invasive weeds and predators, along with continued monitoring and research.

The marshes drive a food chain that supports migrating birds on the Pacific Flyway and provide nursery grounds for salmon and other fish.

They filter pollutants washing out of the Bay Area's cities.

Of the 190,000 acres of tidal marsh that existed in San Francisco Bay before the Gold Rush, only 16,000 acres remain. Another 24,000 acres have been restored or are in the process of being restored - giving the bay only about one-fifth of the tidal marsh it once had.

"There's never been a recovery plan that has covered such an urbanized area," Bloom said.

Florence LaRiviere, a pioneering Palo Alto environmental activist for whom the marsh is named, said public support in those urban areas would be needed to enact what amounts to a voluntary plan.

"That's where the public comes in," she said.

If enough habitat is available to fully recover clapper rails - which would require increased their population of about 1,000 to 1,500 birds today to about 3,500 - then that will likely take care of most of the needs of the other species in the plan, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The recovery plan figures that clapper rails need another 25,000 acres of marsh, but some of that habitat could come out of marshes that are not yet fully restored, leaving the number of acres of new marsh needed to restore the ecosystem unclear.

The real cost of the project also is undetermined, although the plan puts a \$1.3 billion price tag on 50 years of work.
