

Salt ponds peppered with praise

Feinstein lauds restoration as tidal action set to return to sites for first time in 60 years

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Inside Bay Area

Three years after brokering the deal to buy 15,000 acres of South Bay salt ponds, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., returned to check on efforts to restore them to more natural tidal wetlands.

The Democratic senator helped arrange the \$100 million in state, federal and private foundation money to buy the ponds from agriculture and salt-maker giant Cargill. On Monday, she traveled to tiny Alviso, near San Jose, and the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge to applaud work done since 2003.

"I said at the time I'd like to see the restoration completed in my lifetime," she said Monday in a statement. "Today, we are seeing major progress toward that goal."

This month, via a series of orchestrated levee breaches, refuge managers will open several former Cargill ponds to tidal action for the first time in 60 years.

So far, restoration work has commenced on more than 12,000 acres of the former industrial salt ponds. This month's breaches, including one happening today, start restoration on 500 acres more.

It is the largest restoration effort on the West Coast.

"San Francisco Bay is a site of international significance," said Deputy Interior Secretary Lynn Scarlett, who also was on hand for Monday's ceremony. "We are just beginning to reap the benefits of this unprecedented (restoration) effort."

When Feinstein and then-Gov. Gray Davis announced the salt ponds purchase in 2003, many cheered the effort to put so much acreage into the public's hands.

Others feared state and federal land managers bought more than they could handle, given the complex and expensive work necessary to undo the effects left by 100 years or more of industrial salt-making. They cited difficulties in restoring 10,000 acres of ponds in the North Bay, off the Napa River, that the state bought in 1994 and that remain today largely unrestored.

So far the South Bay has proven skeptics wrong, in large part because managers obtained a key permit early on to pump waters from the ponds back into the Bay.

The permit is crucial in allowing managers to open ponds to the tides. Without the ability to flush water into the San Francisco Bay, the ponds continue to do what they were engineered to do: make salt. The North Bay properties did not obtain such a permit until recently, and salt production there remains an ongoing and confounding problem.

Another worry, for some, is what happens to the wildlife as briny ponds transform into tidal marsh and mud flat. During the years, many waterfowl — particularly diving ducks — have adapted to the ponds, some of which are 10 feet deep and so salty some can support only brine shrimp.

"This is definitely good progress, to open those ponds," said Florence LaRiviere, co-founder of the Citizen's Committee to Complete the Refuge. "I still have a lot of concerns about the mix between ponds and tidal marsh. ... And we have some concerns, like always, about funding."

But on Monday, with the tide surging through the ponds for the first time since 1946, Feinstein and assorted dignitaries were pleased enough with the progress.

"This," Feinstein said, "is a major milestone in the largest wetlands restoration effort in California history."

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US Senator Dianne Feinstein speaks to the media during a celebration of restoration progress at Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge environmental education center in Alviso Monday, March 20, 2006.



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The view from the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge environmental education center in Alviso Monday, March 20, 2006



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Deputy Secretary of the Interior Lynn Scarlett, Calif. Resources Secretary Mike Chrisman, and US Senator Dianne Feinstein speak after a presentation of the restoration progress at Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge environmental education center in Alviso Monday, March 20, 2006.