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Group to delve into Bay salt ponds restoration

By Terence Chea
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SAN FRANCISCO - A newly formed advisory group will meet for the first time next week to discuss the West Coast's largest wetlands restoration project -- the conversion of 15,100 acres of industrial salt ponds along the southern edge of San Francisco Bay.

The 28-member committee will recommend approaches to habitat restoration, public access and flood management for the government-run South Bay Salt Pond Restoration. The committee, known as the "stakeholder forum," represents environmental groups, business, government, community organizations and recreation groups.

"To be successful, we need to get a lot of public support," said Nadine Hitchcock, the San Francisco Bay program manager for the California Coastal Conservancy, which is developing the restoration plan. "Our hope is to get the best knowledge by involving a wide range of people."

San Francisco Bay once had 190,000 acres of tidal marsh, but about 80 percent of the wetlands have been diked, drained, filled or paved over. As part of a major recovery effort, earlier this year a public-private consortium paid \$100 million to Minneapolis-based Cargill Salt for 16,500 acres of its ponds. About 1,400 of those acres are along the Napa River.

The San Francisco Bay project aims to restore wetland habitat for endangered species and migratory birds, improve flood management in neighboring communities and provide public access for recreation and education.

The project is jointly managed by the Coastal Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of

Fish and Game. The restoration plan is expected to take about five years to develop while the restoration itself will take several decades, Hitchcock said.

The stakeholder forum will convene for the first time Thursday in Palo Alto, where members will begin drafting their objectives. The committee will probably meet two or three times a year and also form smaller groups to focus on specific issues, Hitchcock said.

"Our job is to keep our respective constituencies informed and engage the public in every step," said Mike Sellors, a forum member and director of the National Audubon Society's San Francisco Bay Restoration Program.

San Francisco Bay is an important stop on the Pacific Flyway, the West Coast's main route for migratory birds that runs from Alaska to Argentina, Sellors said.

"Restoring the salt ponds is not only important to the 7 million people who live around the Bay," Sellors said. "It's also important internationally to the millions of birds who depend on the Bay during their migration."