

Levee breach bringing new life to Hayward shoreline

By Eric Kurhi
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HAYWARD -- It took seven scoops from a backhoe Tuesday to breach a levee at the edge of San Francisco Bay, allowing tendrils of slate-gray seawater to start slowly reclaiming nearly a square mile of the Hayward shoreline.

The restoration process begins immediately, as sea life is flushed into a salt-crustured moonscape with the initial invasion of high tide.

First come the creatures that like a plant-free pond with a muddy bottom.

"It won't be just mud, it's full of life," said Austin Payne, a Ducks Unlimited engineer who is involved with the project. "Invertebrates, bugs, bigger bugs that eat other bugs."

Thus begins the food chain.

Those little edibles are followed by the fish -- smelt, anchovies and mudsuckers. Then the herons, egrets, harbor seals and leopard sharks.

"When you open things up, you are giving nature the opportunity to restore itself," said Carl Wilcox, regional manager with the California Department of Fish and Game.

Tuesday's breach was the first in the northern portion of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, an ambitious effort to return more than 15,000 acres of salt flats to a natural state.

The Hayward-Union City site at Eden Landing eventually will encompass more than 4,000 acres. Other project areas include more than 7,000 acres in Alviso and about 2,000 acres at the west end of the Dumbarton Bridge.

The largest wetlands restoration on the Pacific Coast is being

achieved through a partnership of state and federal agencies, as well as private funding from numerous sources.

Counting the 630 acres being inundated after Tuesday's break, 3,000 acres of former salt flats in all project areas already are in the process of restoration.

But it's not simple.

Mother Nature does an excellent job of providing a mix of habitats, but these days the land is developed far closer to the bay than it was in the past, Payne said, leaving less room for such variety.

The project's goal is to replicate that hand of nature, creating the diverse ecosystems preferred by different shoreline critters.

It doesn't happen overnight. When the effort began 10 years ago, the target was to see 90 percent of the land restored in half a century.

"But depending on how the birds and fish respond, we may only get 50 percent," said project director John Bourgeois.

Bourgeois said it's an evolving plan that takes a lot of monitoring.

They don't want to evict the creatures that now call the area home, and will keep a close eye to make

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sure they stick around.

"Some species are used to having the salt flats," Bourgeois said. "We don't want to do anything that would negatively affect those small shore birds. It's also an important stopover for migratory birds. We need to see how they respond."

Wilcox got involved with the Hayward shoreline area when it was in danger of being developed and turned into a racetrack and entertainment complex in the 1980s.

That plan was derailed because it's the habitat of the endangered salt marsh harvest mouse, which, along with the clapper rail, remains one of the area's most desired denizens.

"They are endemic to this kind of habitat, and once they colonize the site, you know you are successful." Bourgeois said.

Contact Eric Kurhi at 510-293-2473. Follow him at [Twitter.com/erickurhi](https://twitter.com/erickurhi). Read his blog at IBAbuzz.com/hayword.

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