

Ducks Unlimited set to restore MV salt ponds

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Megan V. Winslow/Town Crier

Alga floats on the surface of the salt ponds at Shoreline Park in Mountain View. Beginning in 2017, Ducks Unlimited, a Memphis, Tenn.-based nonprofit organization, will spend \$14 million to rehabilitate the ponds.

Today, the Mountain View salt ponds north of Shoreline Park provide waterfowl habitat, but their tides do not provide resistance to rising sea levels.

A few years from now, the new-and-improved ponds should lower flood risk and make for an even better home for birds.

A three-year project to restore the ponds is scheduled to begin as soon as 2017, thanks to funds provided by the California State Coastal Conservancy. The nearly \$14 million was awarded to Ducks Unlimited to implement the rehabilitation. Ducks Unlimited, based in Memphis, Tenn., is a nonprofit group that describes itself as “the world’s leader in wetlands and waterfowl conservation.”

The venture is part of Phase 2 of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, deemed the largest tidal wetland restoration project on the West Coast. The Mountain View ponds, located between Charleston Slough and Stevens Creek, are part of the 750 acres of tidal wetlands slated for restoration in the area.

According to John Bourgeois, executive project manager, the ponds had been diked off to create salt evaporation ponds. Now, the industrial salt ponds are being returned to their original state.

The San Francisco Bay has lost an estimated 85 percent of its historic wetlands, according to a Ducks Unlimited press release.

“The era between probably the 1880s to (the early 1900s) is when most of the draining and reclamation of the baylands surrounding San Francisco Bay Estuary occurred,” project biologist Renee Spent told the Town Crier, “and by the 1930s, most major waterways in California had been dammed and otherwise altered.”

The altered tidal wetlands caused the decline of marsh-dependent fish and wildlife, decreased water quality and increased flood risks, said Ducks Unlimited officials.

With the grant and partnership with the California State Coastal Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited will also be able to improve the surrounding infrastructure – which includes levees and PG&E towers – and protect the landfill at Shoreline Park from rising waters. In addition, the project involves creating habitat features, improving public access and breaching the manmade ponds to allow bay waters to return.

The hope is that the ponds will not only be rejuvenated into healthier homes for wildlife, but also include pedestrian-friendly trails that link to the Bay Trail spine where possible, Spent said.

With better water quality and flood protection, Bourgeois said the ponds would provide a suitable habitat for steelhead trout and aid in the recovery of two endangered species: the salt marsh harvest mouse and the California Ridgway’s rail.

The South Bay Salt Ponds – acquired in 2003 from Cargill Salt and now owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – are part of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. The final plan for the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project was officially adopted in 2008. After Phase 1 wrapped up in May, plans for Phase 2 took shape. The second phase is scheduled to start next year or 2018 at the latest, and will take approximately three years to complete.

For more information, visit southbayrestoration.org.