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Salt pond project puts species at odds

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Inside Bay Area

MENLO PARK

A plan to turn hundreds of acres of sun-baked salt ponds back into marshland will attract the California clapper rail and the Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse, two endangered species that used to thrive in the South Bay in the late 19th century before the first salt ponds were constructed.

On the other hand, desalinating the ponds and adding new vegetation could spell trouble for the western snowy plover, a skittish, threatened bird that has begun laying its eggs on the dry, salty beaches. Several other birds also depend on the supply of brine shrimp the salt ponds produce, including avocets, western sandpipers and cormorants.

Some biologists worry that the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, a plan to open 15,000 acres of former Cargill salt ponds to Bay tides, could have unintended negative consequences for those birds while benefiting other species.

Officials with the Coastal Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service face a difficult decision in choosing how much tidal action to let into the salt ponds, which stretch from Redwood City to San Jose, acquired from Cargill in 2003.

"The snowy plover is special, because they require their own sort of habitat in the breeding season," said Cheryl Strong, a biologist with the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory in Alviso. "Not only do we need to maintain some salty habitats, we need to maintain some of them as high-salinity ponds."

Bay water has already been allowed to circulate under controlled conditions in most of the reclaimed salt ponds the Fish and Wildlife Service has acquired in areas off the Redwood City shore, near Alviso and north of Newark, according to Steve Ritchie, manager of the Salt Pond Restoration Project for the Coastal Conservancy.

The next step will be to breach all the levees that separate the ponds from the Bay and allow the tides in, a gradual process that will see 50 percent of the ponds opened by 2026, according to Ritchie.

He said a few ponds will be allowed to retain a high salt content for the sake of some species, such as the snowy plover.

Depending on how the wildlife responds to the changes, officials may then decide to open up all but 10 percent of the ponds to Bay tides.

"We want to restore the connection with the Bay that's been lost for so long. We've lost 85 percent or more of the tidal marshes around the Bay, and this is an effort to bring them back," Ritchie said.

Strong contended that heavier tidal marshes will also mean a loss of acreage birds currently use to roost or lay their eggs.

"With far fewer ponds, you're going to have all your eggs in one pond. But if something were to happen to flood the pond, we'd probably lose a lot of birds," she said.

A greater number of prey will also attract more predators such as foxes, skunks and raccoons, which come to steal their eggs, said Strong.

Ritchie said he hoped to avoid some of that problem by building mud flats and small islands above sea level for wildlife. The levees, which currently stretch far into the Bay, would be rebuilt closer to the shoreline to protect Silicon Valley businesses from flooding.

He said the Coastal Conservancy would spend up to \$1 billion over the next 50 years to re-engineer the marshes and build dozens of public access roads, including one in Menlo Park, to enhance eco-tourism in the area. That work could begin as soon as 2008, pending approval of an environmental impact report and an opportunity for the public to comment.

"We don't want to eliminate too much of the habitat," said Ritchie. "It's pointless to save one endangered species and drive another back to the point of being endangered."

Cargill is in the process of closing its Redwood City production facility, and has held on to more than 1,000 acres that it plans to redevelop. Its main production plant in Newark is still functional.

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