

Mercury News editorial: San Francisco Bay wetlands need to be restored

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This region is running out of time to protect one of its greatest resources -- the San Francisco Bay -- against the ravages of climate change.

At stake are billions of dollars worth of highways, airports, businesses and homes on land immediately adjacent to the Bay. Water levels have already risen 8 inches since 1900, and they are expected to rise another foot in the next 20 years and two feet by 2050. It may not sound like much, but it could be disastrous.

The dangers are outlined in new report, "The Baylands and Climate Change: What We Can Do (www.baylandsgoals.org)." It makes a strong case for restoring 54,000 acres of wetlands that would both greatly mitigate the damage from rising seas by, among other things, reducing the danger from severe flooding.

We can do this. Let's get started.

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority is the regional agency that would oversee the project. It should move forward with its plan to place a \$12 annual parcel tax measure before voters in 2016. That would raise \$500 million over 20 years and potentially leverage matching dollars from the state and federal governments to help reach the \$1.5 billion estimated cost.

The federal government spent nearly \$500 million in 2011 helping protect Chesapeake Bay. The San Francisco Bay region, including Silicon Valley, is even more important to the national economy.

The damage to the bay that now needs reversing is man-made. Reporter Paul Rogers set out the history in a report on the bay plan in this newspaper last Monday.

The bay has shrunk by more than one-third since the Gold Rush in 1849, thanks to diking, development and filling. State and federal law stopped those practices in the 1980s, and restoration work began in 1999. To date, more than 6,000 acres have been restored, with great results, doubling the bird population in the bay since 2002. An additional 26,000 acres have been purchased to be returned to wetlands. These are part of the 54,000 acre goal. But that leaves 28,000 acres to be bought and restored.

Sea walls still will need to be constructed in some locations, including San Francisco and Oakland's airports. But business and environmental groups around the bay agree that restoring wetlands is greatly preferable from an environmental, recreational and aesthetic standpoint.

The San Francisco Bay's existing wetlands are part of the area's beauty, provide habitat for endangered species and migratory birds and offer recreational opportunities. But wetlands reduce the strength of waves hitting the shoreline and are vital to warding off floods. The height of the wetlands can also be raised by adding sediment.

Business and environmental organizations around the Bay support the restoration plan. So do advocates of low income communities vulnerable to flooding, from Alviso to to Richmond. We hope when voters understand the need, they will agree.