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\$1.43 billion restoration of 36,000 acres of bay wetlands floated in report

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(08-28) 14:45 PDT San Francisco -- The Bay Area needs a bold plan to generate enough money to restore the bay's wetlands and rebuild an ecosystem necessary for a healthy estuary, according to a new report from an environmental group.

Spending \$1.43 billion over half a century would restore about 36,000 acres of once-diked wetlands and double the amount of tidal marsh ringing San Francisco Bay, states the report released Tuesday by Save the Bay, an Oakland nonprofit organization founded 45 years ago.

The report recommends initiating a unified effort by nine Bay Area counties and obtaining funds through congressional bills, state and local bonds and even new taxes. The \$1.43 billion goal could be met if every Bay Area resident gave \$4 a year over 50 years, the report said.

In a campaign to expand space for wildlife, boost recreational opportunities and improve flood control, state and federal agencies over the past decade have spent nearly \$370.5 million to buy and start restoration of 36,176 acres. That land can be found on a total of 13 sites, including Bair Island near Redwood City, Hamilton Field and Bel Marin Keys near Novato and some of the former Cargill salt ponds in the South Bay.

But a great deal of work still needs to be done and cannot be accomplished without a plan backed by public funds, the report said. With such money, government agencies would be able to complete the restoration work on land already acquired, according to the group.

Tidal marshes are the foundation of a healthy estuary, scientists agree. The soggy ecosystems help control floodwaters, including those caused by rising seas. Marshes also catch pollutants and act as a rich nursery for mussels, oysters, worms and crustaceans at the base of the bay's web of aquatic life. Without a functioning tidal marsh, there's not much for young Dungeness crab, salmon and steelhead to eat.

Over the past 200 years, the growing Bay Area population has built towns, roads and other development on top of filled tidal marsh, cutting the bay's original ring of 190,000 acres to 40,000

acres - an 80 percent loss.

Local officials in 2000 set a goal of restoring wetlands to 100,000 acres. Adding 36,176 acres identified by Save the Bay to the 40,000 acres of existing salt marsh would bring the bay's total to about 76,176 acres. Government agencies involved in the restoration effort haven't identified the rest of the land that could be used to meet the 100,000-acre goal.

Much of the money spent to bring back the wetlands - most of which were diked for farms, cities and salt ponds - has come from bonds and private foundations. But a lack of consistent funding is hampering recovery efforts, and there is a shortfall of money in government budgets to pay for staff, engineering work and construction, the Save the Bay report said.

With the purchase of some Cargill salt ponds in 2003, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acquired 9,600 acres for the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, making the agency responsible for 70 miles of levees and other structures. Yet during that time, refuge budgets were shrinking or staying the same, often forcing officials to do more with less. Also in 2003, the state Fish and Game Department acquired 6,900 acres of salt pond land. However, only one Fish and Game Department scientist is dedicated to protecting wildlife in three counties as well as looking after more than 6,000 acres of the department's property, the report said.

Save the Bay was founded in 1962 as part of a movement to halt the filling of the bay and put an end to garbage dumps and filthy sewage plants that threaten the bay's water quality. It's the oldest group dedicated to preserving the bay's natural resources. Tuesday's report contends that local residents care even more deeply about the bay now than they did then and are willing to pay to save it.

A poll conducted by EMC Research on behalf of the environmental group indicates that Bay Area voters would agree to "pay modest taxes for bay wetland restoration." Eighty-three percent of residents polled said they would pay \$10 a year in taxes or fees to restore wetlands that would result in cleaner bay water, provide flood control benefits, enlarge the San Francisco Bay refuge and increase shoreline access for the public.

"The bay is an ecosystem that touches nine counties and millions of people and ignores municipal borders," the report said. The environmental groups said advocating for the bay with "one regionwide voice is essential to success in securing needed state and federal funds."

The group compiled cost figures by estimating yet-to-be-done restoration, 10 years of monitoring and operation and maintenance for 50 years at 13 sites.

The sites include the 1,564-acre Cullinan Ranch owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on San Pablo Bay; the 418-acre Bahia site owned by the Marin Audubon Society; 722-acre Eden Landing near Hayward owned by the state Department of Fish and Game; and the 970-acre Sears Point wetland owned by the Sonoma Land Trust.

Raising public funds for wetlands restoration is something businesses are likely to support, said John Grubb, a spokesman for the Bay Area Council. The council is made up of CEOs from the region's 275 largest employers.

"We believe in targeted investments that provide a return on quality of life, and this would seem to pass that test," he said. "We're in a global competition for talent, and one of the ways you convince people to move to our region and work for our companies is by offering them a great place to live. Environmental protection and restoration are essential to a good quality of life."

Online resources

Download the save the bay report:

links.sfgate.com/ZQS

How to help

There are several ways to get involved in the restoration of San Francisco Bay wetlands. Some environmental groups recruit volunteers. Some government agencies work on restoration programs. And your local, state and federal representatives decide environmental policy for the bay.

-- Save the Bay: (510) 452-9261; www.savesfbay.org.

-- The Bay Institute: (415) 506-0150; www.bay.org.

-- BayKeeper: (415) 856-0444, extension 101; www.sfbaykeeper.org.

-- The California Coastal Conservancy is a state agency that works to preserve, restore and protect the coast and San Francisco Bay: (510) 286-4180; www.scc.ca.gov.

-- California's two U.S. senators both hold important positions on committees that can influence environmental policy:

Sen. Dianne Feinstein: (415) 393-0707

Sen. Barbara Boxer: (415) 403-0100

-- Contact your representative in the state Legislature: www.leginfo.ca.gov.

-- Contact your member of Congress: www.house.gov/writerep.

E-mail Jane Kay at jkay@sfgate.com.

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