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Marsh plan nearly final, but no funds

Carolyn Jones, Chronicle Staff Writer

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San Francisco Bay's beleaguered shoreline will once again teem with rare shorebirds, harvest mice and native grasses under an ambitious, 50-year restoration plan announced Wednesday.

The effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service calls for dozens of restored marshes from Alviso to Suisun to provide habitat for 17 endangered or threatened plants and animals.

It is the second largest tidal marsh recovery plan ever undertaken in the United States, second only to the ambitious effort to restore the Florida Everglades.

"If the last century was the age of destruction, we're now in the age of restoration," said Mendel Stewart, manager of the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex. "And what do you need to recover marsh species? You need marsh."

The bay's marshes could use a boost. Only 8 percent, or 16,000 acres, of the bay's historic 190,000 acres of marshland remain after 150 years of development and infill.

The result is that dozens of animal populations have dwindled. Clapper rails, for example, a colorful shorebird, once numbered in the hundreds of thousands around the bay. But because of hunting, loss of habitat and predation by nonnative species, fewer than 1,500 remain.

The marsh restoration plan, which took 15 years to complete, calls for new wetlands in all areas of the bay shoreline, as well as research, public education, and trapping and relocating predators, such as feral cats and nonnative red foxes.

No money set aside

While the plan sets out lofty restoration goals, it would be largely a voluntary program. Much of the targeted land is owned by cities, counties, park districts and nonprofit groups. Also, no money has been dedicated to implement the plan.

Many city officials said they'd love to restore the shoreline but lack the funds to buy land and clean it up.

"Of course we'd support it, I just don't know how we'd get it done," said Terri Hardesty, spokeswoman for the city of San Rafael. "It gets very complicated with funding, development rights."

Nonetheless, the effort is a critical step in protecting the marshes, environmentalists said Wednesday.

"This plan is a rallying cry that we should now aggressively pursue tidal marsh restoration, and we should do it quickly," said Marc Holmes, bay restoration director of the Bay Institute in Novato. "On the level of urgency, this is a 10 out of 10."

Holmes called the new plan a "tremendous advance" because it provides the first comprehensive guide to wetlands restoration around the bay, which until now has been handled in an ad hoc manner.

Marshes are not just habitat for wildlife, they also filter pollutants from the bay and provide a buffer from flooding and rising sea levels, he said.

The plan will now undergo a 120-day public comment period, then return to Fish and Wildlife staff for revisions. They expect to release the final report and begin implementation later this year.

The salt ponds

Keeping a close eye on the plan is the Cargill agribusiness giant, which produces salt on 12,500 acres of bay wetlands.

"We're in the business of making salt, and they're in the business of restoration, and we need to make sure we can continue to cooperate," said Pat Mapelli, the company's real property manager.

Most of Cargill's salt ponds are on land Cargill sold or donated to the government in exchange for the right to produce salt there forever. That agreement would not change under the restoration plan, Stewart said, but Cargill wants to ensure its interests are protected.

Among those most excited by Wednesday's announcement was Florence LaRiviere, 86, of Palo Alto, who has been working on saving the bay's wetlands since 1965.

"It's wonderful because it protects these very unique animals," said LaRiviere, who has a marsh named after her at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. "It's our obligation, I think, to bring these areas back to viability."

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E-mail Carolyn Jones at carolynjones@sfchronicle.com.

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