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Wetlands in a delicate balance

Officials hope to accommodate preservation of land and availability to humans in Bair Island and South Bay

By Neil Gonzales, STAFF WRITER

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REDWOOD CITY — A delicate balancing act is afoot to restore wetlands along the Peninsula while trying to bring humans closer to the wildlife that's expected to flourish in the resurrected habitat.

Wildlife and other officials view improved trails and public access as a key element to the success of the Bair Island and South Bay Salt Pond restoration projects.

"We think it's very important for the public to become educated about and familiar with, and fall in love with wildlife," said Clyde Morris, manager of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, which includes the 3,000-acre Bair Island. "But we have to do it in ways that are protective of wildlife. It is a challenge."

The Bair Island project, while seeking to restore 1,400 acres of wetlands, also proposes to improve public access to an existing trail by expanding a parking lot and building a pedestrian bridge near Pete's Harbor, Morris said. "That will make access to the trail safer and better."

The project would also add viewing platforms and interpretive signs close to Pete's Harbor and the San Carlos Airport on the other side of Bair Island, he said.

"We want to make it more appealing to wildlife-related activities, environmental education and wildlife photography," he said.

Currently, the trail is more for jogging and for people to walk their dogs. Morris said dogs will still be allowed on the trail, once the restoration work is in full swing in about two years,

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A larger restoration project is the plan to open 15,000 acres of former Cargill salt ponds to Bay tides. The ponds stretch from Redwood City to San Jose.

The South Bay Salt Pond project would cost an estimated \$1 billion over the next 50 years and build dozens of trails.

The Menlo Park area could see some public-access and other improvements to encourage people to enjoy and learn about the wildlife in restored marshlands, said Eileen McLaughlin, project director for Alviso-based nonprofit Wildlife Stewards.

Bayfront Park, for instance, could have an interpretive center and viewing point overlooking the Bay, she said.

She said providing public access to the renewed habitat is a way to gain ongoing community support for the restoration projects.

"As we provide access, we let people see how wonderful this is," she said. "It's getting the public out there to enjoy nature, and it tells them how their money is being spent."

Although the Bair Island project is moving ahead, it still needs more funding.

That's why Morris hopes voters pass state Proposition 84 in November.

The proposition is a \$5.4 billion bond measure, with half of that money going to the restoration and preservation of habitat, rivers and coastal areas.

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