

San Francisco Bay: Feds release 50-year, \$1.2 billion plan to restore wetlands and wildlife

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Noting that the ongoing effort to restore thousands of acres of marshes and wildlife around San Francisco Bay is the largest wetlands renaissance in the United States other than the restoration of the Florida Everglades, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Thursday unveiled a 50-year blueprint to finish the job.

The 414-page document was released amid fanfare at a midmorning news conference. But in many ways the plan is more symbolism than substance.

It estimates the cost to recover key endangered species around the bay and finish wetlands restoration at \$1.2 billion between now and 2063. Yet the plan contains no new money or regulations. In fact, the blueprint's proposals for what lands to buy, which scientific projects to complete and what kinds of tactics should be used to restore the bay to conditions not seen since the 1800s are all voluntary.

Still, federal officials and environmentalists who rolled the plan out said it performs two key roles. First, it offers a clear overview for to politicians to help raise the money that will be needed in the decades ahead to turn old salt evaporation ponds in the South Bay, hay fields in the North Bay and other bay front lands from Richmond to Redwood City back into wetlands for fish, birds and wildlife. And second, it's a hymnal of sorts from which the dozens of groups working on bay projects can all sing in the years to come.

"This is a road map for the future of bay recovery," said Cay Goude, assistant field supervisor in the Sacramento field office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "It provides guidance and information so you can best use your money. It helps coordinate so that people aren't duplicating efforts and are working in a more cohesive way -- everyone, government agencies, nonprofits, scientists."

Technically, the plan aims to bring six endangered species that live around San Francisco Bay back to health. They are the California clapper rail, a diminutive bird, the salt marsh harvest mouse and four rare plants: Suisun thistle, soft bird's beak, California sea-blite and the northern population of salt marsh bird's beak.

In restoring wetlands to help those species, however, it also will assist hundreds of other types of wildlife that use marshes and wetlands, from ducks to herons to salmon.

"It's about fairness," said Florence LaRiviere, a retired Palo Alto schoolteacher who has worked for nearly 50 years to restore wetlands around the bay.

"If we're here and multiplying, I don't feel that the creatures with whom we share the Earth should be allowed to go extinct," she said. "The bay is what makes this area. It gives it the attraction it has."

Since the Gold Rush of 1849, San Francisco Bay has shrunk by a third, as people diked, dredged and filled its waters to create hay fields, housing subdivisions like Foster City, even airport runways. From 1800 to 1988, the bay lost 79 percent of its tidal wetlands, going from 190,000 acres to about 40,000 acres.

The rampant filling largely stopped in the 1970s, with the advent of modern environmental laws such as the federal Clean Water Act.

Over the past 25 years, environmental groups and government agencies have been restoring wetlands around the bay, slowly pushing it back into its historic footprint. During that time, they have either restored, or are planning restoration, of 35,000 acres, the most high profile of which has been the former Cargill salt ponds from Hayward to Alviso to Redwood City. Their goal: Finish those and do another 25,000.

"This document reinforces the great work that a lot of agencies around the bay are implementing already," said John Bourgeois, project manager of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration. "In the past decade, we've restored over 3,000 acres of South Bay salt ponds alone. This is a good road map to help us achieve the overall goal."

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