

Road map plots restoration of South Bay salt ponds

By Lisa M. Krieger
Mercury News

Article Launched: 12/13/2007 01:35:19 AM PST

The long-awaited road map for restoration of the South Bay's system of salt ponds was released Wednesday, outlining the steps that will be taken to rebuild a working ecosystem in the heart of a metropolis.

"It represents a major milestone in the restoration project. Now we can get the permits in place and begin next year," said South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project manager Steve Ritchie of the California Coastal Conservancy, a state agency based in Oakland. "It will take a long time, so let's get started."

The environmental impact report is the long-term plan for reversion of man-made evaporation ponds to natural tidal habitats, while providing for flood protection and recreational uses.

The report is required by state and federal law before the first change can be made.

Its approach is very similar to that described in a draft report, released in March, with some modifications to reflect more than 310 pages of public opinion. For instance, the project now includes expanded habitat for the endangered snowy plover. It also includes strategies to combat invasive Spartina grass.

The first steps, planned for 2008, will return three regions - Eden Landing, Alviso and Ravenswood - to tidal habitat and shorebird habitat.

This early phase will include almost eight miles of new waterside trails in areas long off-limits to most people, including the edge of Moffett Field. There will also be a boat launching area and a wildlife viewing area.

"Getting to this point is a major achievement to restore the health of the bay," said David Lewis of Save the Bay.

The San Francisco Bay has lost almost all of its tidal marshes, he said. "About 95 percent of the bay's wetlands are gone," Lewis said. "Wetlands are crucial for the bay's health - and for people and wildlife. We have 40,000 acres of marsh now. This project could add another 10,000."

The South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game in collaboration with agencies, is the largest wetlands restoration ever conducted on the West Coast. It is rivaled in size only by efforts to restore the Florida Everglades and Mississippi River Delta in Louisiana.

This unusual back-to-nature experiment will take more than \$1 billion and 50 years of close supervision to roll back the clock to the bay's pre-industrial conditions.

Construction costs for the first phase of the project are estimated to be \$25 million to \$30 million. Construction costs for the entire project could range from \$600 million to \$1 billion. State bonds, federal appropriations, grants, and other sources are expected to fund the restoration.

A few ponds were opened last year in a preliminary

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step.

As work progresses, scientists will cautiously seek the best balance between artificial and wild environments for the creatures that depend on the bay. The optimal mix of habitats has not yet been determined, but the project will ultimately comprise between 50 to 90 percent tidal habitats.

Care will be taken not to suddenly release long-captive salt pond waters. Some salt water ponds may never be fully restored, but will be retained and "managed." Since their creation, several types of birds have become reliant on them. And many of these birds' original habitats have disappeared in the meantime.

Scientists also plan to study levels of species, salinities, water levels and the presence of mercury and other toxins. Some new islands may be built, and predators will be controlled.

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