

Oakland Tribune

A long wait for wetlands restoration

Bay Area improvement plans caught in red tape with no clear way out

By Douglas Fischer
STAFF WRITER

Monday, December 01, 2003 - Ever make an expensive purchase, then wake up the next morning and wonder if you can afford it? This story may sound familiar.

The Bay Area's bid to snag billions of dollars needed to restore the region's newly purchased South Bay salt ponds faces daunting hurdles in Congress and Sacramento alike, potentially leaving nearly 15,000 acres from Hayward to Redwood City in semi-limbo for decades.

The problems come from just about every quarter -- no clear sense of how or what to restore, no consensus in California that this is a priority, no broad community support even in the Bay Area, no scientifically vetted plan.

That's just the small stuff. Northern California already has a \$9 billion restoration project -- the California Federal Bay-Delta Program. And the region faces intense competition for federal restoration dollars from states with no projects and none of those problems. Which means the huge ponds, purchased on the public's behalf 18 months ago for \$100 million, may be sitting there for a long time before much happens.

"You have to have a well-placed delegation and a consensus, unanimous position," said John Leshy, former solicitor for the Interior Department under Bill Clinton and now a professor at University of California, Hastings School of Law in San Francisco. "Everybody has got to be behind it -- the governor, the House, the Legislature. California just doesn't have it."

Eighteen months ago, Sen. Dianne Feinstein muscled together a deal to buy a string of salt ponds from Cargill Inc. Uncle Sam would contribute \$8 million, the state treasury \$25 million and four big foundations a total of \$20 million. Voter-approved wildlife bonds would cover the rest.

At the time, former Gov. Gray Davis called the purchase the "Hope diamond" of wetlands restoration. Estimates of what that would cost bore that out: \$1 billion a year for the next 20 to 100 years.

Then the budget crunch hit. Davis kept the \$25 million in the treasury, replacing it with bond money. The additional \$10 million apiece promised from federal and state coffers for initial restoration work never materialized.

Nor is the problem limited to the South Bay. Off the Napa River, 9,000 acres of salt ponds purchased in 1994, slowly degrade as they await restoration. There are 1,600 acres at Bel Marin Keys in Novato and another 988 acres just to the south at the old Hamilton Army Airfield. Both need millions.

Yosemite Slough in San Francisco faces a \$10 million facelift. Alameda Creek, the new Eastshore State Park, Mare Island -- scores of projects clamor for cash.

Some cash is out there. California voters in 2000 and again in 2002 approved two of the largest conservation bonds in the nation's history. Last year the Coastal Conservancy, the state's chief funding arm for Bay Area projects, paid out \$32 million -- largely from those bonds -- allowing groups to snag \$100 million in matching money from elsewhere.

But that went mostly to acquisitions and non-restoration work: \$30 million to buy the Rancho Corral del Tierra in San Mateo County, \$1.5 million for a conservation easement near Mount Diablo, \$300,000 for San Francisco's Tall Ships Exposition. And the bond measures, large as they were, are mostly spoken for. Little is left for maintenance, let alone restoration.

"What's missing here is a long-term restoration program that enables these projects, like the South Bay salt ponds, the North Bay salt ponds, to know they have a budget every year," said Marc Holmes, director of wetlands restoration for the Bay Institute.

"You don't need the money all at once, but you need some sort of commitment from the state that says, 'OK, you're going to have a budget of \$5 million to \$10 million every year.'"

Two years ago, the Legislature passed a bill allowing Bay Area counties to tack \$4 onto the vehicle license fee for just such a thing. Davis vetoed it.

Florida, in contrast, put up \$4 billion to match a \$4 billion federal restoration of the Everglades -- a commitment that several say was key to Congress' approval.

Louisiana lawmakers are rewriting the constitution to free up more money for federal matching grants to revamp the Mississippi River Delta. Around the Chesapeake Bay, governors from three states will gather on Dec. 9 for an annual confab over the state of the bay's restoration, estimated to need \$19 billion over the next decade.

Those kind of talks haven't happened in California, Holmes said.

"(Former Gov. Pete) Wilson talked a good game as a moderate Republican environmentalist, but he put up no money whatsoever. Davis was no different," he said. "We need to get our act together politically and go with one voice and ask for hundreds of millions of dollars."

And that's where the region runs into what may be the largest obstacle to Bay restoration: Calfed, a \$9 billion project in the works for more than a decade, that could see congressional authorization as soon as next year.

That's Northern California's big federal project. Few expect the

region to get a second one.

Though the project has a restoration side and ostensibly includes the Bay in its scope, it has not received much attention of late, noted David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay. Instead, money goes to levee restoration and fish screens at the huge Delta water pumps.

"It doesn't mean those things aren't needed, but the restoration goal of Calfed isn't met," he said. "We're not buying up water rights or land."

Even without Calfed, and if Feinstein could use her seat on the powerful Appropriations Committee to slip in a funding bill, California would still have problems.

There's no consensus.

Assistant Interior Secretary Bennett Raley has taken to asking the same question as he barnstorms the state as the Bush administration's point man for California water issues: If he could get \$1 billion for restoration work in California, he asks, should he spend it on the Salton Sea or the San Francisco Bay?

"I get fierce responses," he said. "It's not even close, even within the environmental community. That tells you a lot."

And that means nothing is moving in Congress, where lawmakers rarely approve state-specific legislation without a unified position from the home state.

Contrast that with the vote for the Florida Everglades cash, said Mary Doyle, co-director of the Center for Ecosystems, Science and Policy at the University of Miami. The Florida delegation hadn't voted unanimously before and hasn't since, she said, but they did then, when it counted most.

So where does that leave the salt ponds?

In a holding pattern, said Marge Kolar, manager of the Bay

Area's seven national wildlife refuges.

Cargill has agreed to conduct ongoing maintenance, provided state and federal managers meet certain permit deadlines.

Three foundations -- the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation -- are paying \$15 million for interim plans.

The key, Kolar said, is to get those huge ponds -- some of which cover 500 acres -- to stop producing salt. If that succeeds, managers can just let water slowly circulate in and out of the ponds as they wait for their political stars to align.

"It won't be quite the same as being restored, but there will be some habitat values there," she said.

Feinstein spokesman Howard Gantman called any speculation on the California delegation's ability -- or inability -- to bring home federal cash premature. Unified support may be important, he said, but securing money for any project remains today an "extremely difficult" task, no matter how well coordinated the pitch.

Still, to the Bay Institute's Holmes, it would help if the Bay Area could get its act together.

The first question he gets, when asking for help in Sacramento or Washington, D.C., is some variation of "Who's with you on this," Holmes said.

"If you don't have a list of just about everyone, they say, 'I can put something in here for you, but we have no leverage.'

"You've got no juice."

Contact Douglas Fischer at

dfischer@angnewspapers.com