

Oakland Tribune

Salt ponds' restoration clears hurdle

By Douglas Fischer
STAFF WRITER

Thursday, March 18, 2004 - The mammoth effort to restore 15,000 acres of industrial South Bay salt ponds cleared a crucial hurdle Wednesday as the regional water board approved a permit opening the saline ponds to the tides for the first time ever.

Environmentalists, wildlife managers and members of the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board alike called the permit a major way point in the region's effort to return the South Bay to the wildlife mecca it was before early settlers started diking and greatly expanding the region's natural salt ponds.

"This was the first big bar," said Steve Ritchie, executive project manager of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, the joint federal-state effort planning the long-term restoration.

"The ponds -- if you let them go for a minute -- just start making salt on their own. This is part of the plan to keep them circulating, keep them moving, keep them alive."

For years water coursed through the ponds in one direction only -- in from the Bay at inlets near Hayward and Mountain View, through a series of increasingly saline evaporating ponds via pump and siphon, to beds outside Cargill Inc.'s harvesting plants in Newark and Redwood City where salt would finally crystallize about five years later.

Salt ponds ring the South Bay from Hayward to Redwood City.

In 2003 Cargill sold much of its South Bay acreage to the state and federal government in a \$100 million deal brokered by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif. Estimates peg restoration costs at many times that -- from \$400 million to \$1 billion over the course of a century.

But first the new owners needed a way to stop making salt. That required a permit to send water from the ponds to the Bay and hefty analysis of the impact on South Bay's salinity, dissolved oxygen, water temperatures and pH balance.

Wednesday's approval came just in time. A day later and, under the terms of the sale agreement, taxpayers would be on the hook for maintenance and operations of the ponds as Cargill and wildlife managers wrestled salinities down to acceptable levels.

As it is, Cargill retains responsibility for levees and pumps and general operation of any pond too saline to open to the South Bay's waters. The state and federal government will start taking control of those that can be opened -- roughly two-thirds of the 15,000 acres sold, said Carl Wilcox, habitat conservation manager for the California Department of Fish and Game.

"A lot of people were skeptical we could do it," he said. "It took a lot of cooperation to make that happen." In the North Bay, for instance, the state still awaits a similar discharge permit for ponds it purchased in 1994.

With the permit, Wilcox and others said, Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can keep

the South Bay ponds in a holding pattern as a long-term restoration plan is developed -- a process that could take five years.

"This is the first bridge that needed to be crossed," said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay. "Any restoration would've been harder the longer it took to cross that bridge.

"There would be more salt-making to undo."

Contact Douglas Fischer at dfischer@angnews-papers.com