

Wetlands restoration along Dumbarton Bridge speeds up Bay renaissance

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For decades, motorists zooming over the Dumbarton Bridge have had a fairly stark view as they approached Menlo Park: a muddy industrial salt pond, streaked with white saline markings and devoid of much life.

That landscape is about to change, with the completion of the latest wetlands restoration project in the ongoing renaissance of San Francisco Bay and its shoreline.

"There should be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of birds here in the next few months. Just add water and they come," said Mendel Stewart, manager of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

For more than a year, construction crews with heavy machinery working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been turning

the former Cargill Salt pond here into a rich environment for dozens of bird species.

Restoring the bay

Ongoing wetlands and bayfront restoration projects



Sources: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project

- 1 Napa-Sonoma: 1,400 acres of former salt crystalizer beds restored to tidal marsh
- 2 Eden Landing: 630 acres of salt ponds restored to tidal marsh
- 3 Alviso: 1,760 acres in pond A8 and A6 restored to tidal marsh with flood control work
- 4 Moffett Field: 2 miles of new public trail opening later this month
- 5 Redwood City (SF2): 237 acres of restored salt ponds, with 30 islands for birds and public walkways

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At the site, once known as Pond SF2, where salt was produced through evaporation for roads, food and medicine, workers have converted 237 acres into a network of 30 islands, each about half an acre, for avocets, sandpipers, plovers and other shorebirds to nest. They have built public trails, elevated overlooks and interpretive exhibits.

The project, located on the southern edge of Dumbarton Bridge adjacent to a former skeet shooting club that closed in 1994, is part of the restoration of a vast network of former Cargill ponds that make up 20 miles of the South Bay shoreline from Hayward to San Jose to Redwood City.

In 2003, the federal and state governments spent \$100 million to buy 16,500 acres from Cargill Salt, based in Newark. The goal: to turn back the clock a century and re-establish healthy marshes for ducks, shorebirds, fish and other wildlife -- launching the largest wetlands restoration on the West Coast.

After five years of of public meetings and

environmental reviews, construction is under way in earnest.

By the end of this year, 3,081 acres in the South Bay and 1,400 acres in the North Bay near Napa will have been restored to tidal marsh or be under construction. That total of nearly 4,500 acres represents more than a quarter of the entire, massive Cargill transformation. Another 600 acres off Alviso and Hayward are set to be restored back to tidal marsh by 2012.

"I fly over the bay all the time," said Feinstein, who oversaw the Cargill deal. "Instead of these bright orange patches, what you are beginning to see now is bay water and some wetlands growth. For me, it's very exciting."

A big challenge, however, is cost, she said.

Restoration of Pond SF2 cost \$9.2 million, paid for with \$7.6 million in federal funds and \$1.6 million from Caltrans and Menlo Park.

The high price tag, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is because of the unique restoration work. The 50-year plan for restoration of the bay calls for converting up to 90 percent of all the former salt ponds to tidal marsh. In those areas, crews with bulldozers are often able to simply breach earthen levees, strengthen inner levees to provide flood protection and wait for plants and wildlife to come back in a few years. Those ponds can cost as little as \$1 million each to bring back to pre-Gold Rush conditions.

But Pond SF2 is different.

It is designed as a unique "managed pond" where the water will remain 12 inches deep, and the tides

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will be carefully controlled to provide habitat for shorebirds. If the water gets too shallow, it will stagnate. If it gets too deep, birds can't wade there. Restoration requires a complex system of weirs, berms and culverts, and 11 huge steel tidal gates.

"There's nothing else like it anywhere in the bay," said John Bourgeois, manager of the South Bay Salt Restoration Project.

State and federal officials estimated three years ago that the whole Cargill restoration would cost \$987 million over the next 50 years, most of it to upgrade flood-control levees around South Bay communities.

In April, U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Hillsborough, introduced a bill to provide \$100 million a year for 10 years in federal funding to cover the costs. But Feinstein, who heads the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Environment, said that's not politically feasible.

"That's not going to happen. Trust me, it's impossible," she said on Friday.

Private foundations, state bond funds and individual donors will have to pay a large amount of the cost, she said.

David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay, an environmental group in Oakland, said \$1 billion over 50 years is the same or less as restoration projects have been given in the Everglades, Great Lakes and other nationally important sites.

Lewis, whose group is seeking volunteers to plant thousands of native plants at Pond SF2, is also part of a group studying the feasibility of putting a sales tax or small property tax, perhaps \$5 a year, before Bay Area voters to fund bay restoration.

"It's a bargain," he said. "You get habitat for wildlife, recreation, water quality and flood protection. San Francisco Bay is one of the rarest and most precious habitats on earth."

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From left, San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex (NWRC) Manager Mendel Stewert and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Maintenance workers Juan Flores and Calvin Sahara prepare a viewing platform for the opening of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Ravenswood Unit, in Redwood City, Calif., on September 3, 2010. The Wildlife refuge is a prominent wetlands restoration project on the Redwood City shoreline. Federal and state crews have reconfigured a former Cargill Salt pond near the Dumbarton Bridge into a marsh, building 30 islands for shorebirds, along with overlooks, new trails and wooden walkways for the public. (LiPo Ching/Mercury News) (LiPo Ching)



With the Dumbarton Bridge in the background, San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex (NWRC) Public Affairs Officer Doug Cordell looks out at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Ravenswood Unit, in Redwood City, Calif., on September 3, 2010. The Wildlife refuge is a prominent wetlands restoration project on the Redwood City shoreline. Federal and state crews have reconfigured a former Cargill Salt pond near the Dumbarton Bridge into a marsh, building 30 islands for shorebirds, along with overlooks, new trails and wooden walkways for the public. (LiPo Ching/Mercury News) (LiPo Ching)



The marsh at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Ravenswood Unit, in Redwood City, Calif., on September 3, 2010. The Wildlife refuge is a prominent wetlands restoration project on the Redwood City shoreline. Federal and state crews have reconfigured a former Cargill Salt pond near the Dumbarton Bridge into a marsh, building 30 islands for shorebirds, along with overlooks, new trails and wooden walkways for the public. (LiPo Ching/Mercury News) (LiPo Ching)



From left, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Maintenance workers Juan Flores and Calvin Sahara wash a viewing platform for the opening of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Ravenswood Unit, in Redwood City, Calif., on September 3, 2010. The Wildlife refuge is a prominent wetlands restoration project on the Redwood City shoreline. Federal and state crews have reconfigured a former Cargill Salt pond near the Dumbarton Bridge into a marsh, building 30 islands for shorebirds, along with overlooks, new trails and wooden walkways for the public. (LiPo Ching/Mercury News) (LiPo Ching)



2002: With a backdrop of the Dumbarton Bridge and Newark salt ponds, California Governor Gray Davis, left, and Senator Dianne Feinstein, right, participate in the ceremony announcing an historic wetlands agreement. (Susanna Frohman, Mercury News)