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Just add water: former Cargill salt ponds being converted to tidal marsh, expanding the bay

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Seven years ago, a \$100 million deal by the federal and state government to purchase 16,500 acres of industrial salt-evaporation ponds along the southern shoreline of San Francisco Bay made national news.

It was to be the biggest wetlands restoration ever attempted in the West, an opportunity to bring back fish, birds, harbor seals and other wildlife to levels not seen in perhaps a century. But then came years of scientific studies and public meetings.

On Tuesday, the follow-through took shape atop the earthen levees south of the San Mateo Bridge near Hayward, as 20 massive dump trucks moved piles of dark soil, and excavators reshaped the landscape while white pelicans and egrets drifted through breezy blue skies above it all.

"This is the culmination of all the work we have been doing. This is what we've been waiting for -- dirt being moved, bay waters coming back," said John Bourgeois, manager of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project.

The work on the shoreline at Eden Landing is a microcosm of the overall bay restoration effort. It began in July and is scheduled for completion in two years. The project aims to restore to tidal marsh 630 acres of former industrial salt evaporation ponds that were once used to concentrate salt for roads, food and medical uses.

Over an area roughly the size of 600 football fields, workers in hard hats and orange vests are reshaping and taking down levees that now are 8 to 10 feet tall.


Next summer, bay waters will pour into the landscape, which in the 1800s was a rich mix of marshes and sloughs. Today, that area looks like an arid, whitish moonscape.

In some areas, crews will break thick crusts of gypsum up to one foot deep left from Cargill's old salt operations, to allow plants like pickleweed, native spartina and alkali heath to grow back more quickly.

When the bay waters flow in, fish and crabs will quickly follow, along with the rich, living soup of plankton

and other tiny organisms now found in bay waters, said John Krause, an associate wildlife biologist with the state Department of Fish and Game, which owns the site.

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Cargill salt ponds

- Former Cargill land owned by state and federal governments
- Land Cargill still owns



Sources: California Coastal Conservancy, Cargill Salt
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sources: \$3 million from federal stimulus funds; \$1.6 million from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; \$1.5 million from Proposition 50, a state water and conservation bond passed by voters in 2002; and \$800,000 from the Alameda County Flood Control District.

After Cargill sold many of its holdings in 2003, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state Department of Fish and Game and other agencies began a long planning process. It involved holding hundreds of public meetings, assembling scientific panels and finally releasing a 50-year plan and environmental study in December 2007, totaling more than 3,400 pages.

With those plans in place, construction on restoration has accelerated.

By the end of this year, 3,081 acres in the South Bay and 1,400 acres of former Cargill lands 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 effort.

"It's very exciting. Our goals are finally coming to fruition," said Florence LaRiviere, co-founder of the Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, an environmental group in Palo Alto that has pushed for decades to restore bay wetlands.

"But it's nowhere near the end," she said. "There is a lot of land that was San Francisco Bay that still needs to be restored."

LaRiviere cited hayfields in the North Bay that were built decades ago after farmers filled in wetlands and thousands of acres that Cargill still owns in and

Within five years, harbor seals and endangered species such as the salt marsh harvest mouse are expected to return as well.

"Harbor seals will come in. They follow the bait fish," said Krause. "I've seen them floating around here."

Plans are afoot for another 230 acres in two other adjacent former salt ponds to be restored by 2014. After that, 3.5 miles of public trails will be built along the levees so hikers can see the expanding bay and its growing wildlife populations up close.

The \$6.9 million project is funded from a variety of

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State and federal officials have said it could take 30 to 50 years to restore nearly all 16,500 acres. That's in large part because of the availability of funding and complications, such as making sure to build up levees in some places to reduce flood risk or studying what happens to mercury built up in the sediments of the bay in some areas.

"We've done the low-hanging fruit," Bourgeois said when asked about the relatively fast pace of restoration so far.

He noted that the areas restored -- whether off Hayward, Alviso or Menlo Park -- have been the areas without significant complications, such as flood risk. Restoring other areas, such as ponds in parts of Alviso where there is flood risk, will take more study.

But early efforts appear to be working. Since bay waters were restored at three "island ponds" off Milpitas in 2006, thousands of stilts, avocets and white pelicans have returned, as have anchovies, sculpin and other fish, and a rich mix of plants.

David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay, an environmental group in Oakland, said that securing funding to continue the restoration will be a key goal.

"This is not work where you can just snap your fingers," Lewis said. "But the pace of restoration has moved very quickly when you consider that the destruction of bay marshes occurred over 150 years. To have restored 4,500 acres in just a few years is actually turning back the clock pretty quickly."

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This is a view of the Salt Pond E8A on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2010. The project, at Eden Landing, just sound of the San Mateo Bridge, is the latest step in the decades-long effort to restore 16,500 acres of former Cargill ponds back to natural conditions. Since 2003, when the state and federal government bought the lands, which make up more than 20 miles of the South Bay shoreline for \$100 million, they have spent another \$90 million on construction, planning, scientific studies and other restoration efforts. (Karen T. Borchers/Mercury News) (KAREN T. BORCHERS)



This is a view of Salt Pond E8A with the Diablo Range Fremont Peak in the background on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2010. The project, at Eden Landing, just south of the San Mateo Bridge, is the latest step in the decades-long effort to restore 16,500 acres of former Cargill ponds back to natural conditions. Since 2003, when the state and federal government bought the lands, which make up more than 20 miles of the South Bay shoreline for \$100 million, they have spent another \$90 million on construction, planning, scientific studies and other restoration efforts. (Karen T. Borchers/Mercury News) (KAREN T. BORCHERS)



This is a view of Salt Pond E8A, with San Francisco in the background on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2010. The project, at Eden Landing, just south of the San Mateo Bridge, is the latest step in the decades-long effort to restore 16,500 acres of former Cargill ponds back to natural conditions. Since 2003, when the state and federal government bought the lands, which make up more than 20 miles of the South Bay shoreline for \$100 million, they have spent another \$90 million on construction, planning, scientific studies and other restoration efforts. (Karen T. Borchers/Mercury News) (KAREN T. BORCHERS)



At left is John Bourgeois, executive project manager for South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, with the Coastal Conservancy in front of Salt Pond E8A, with John Krause, right, associate wildlife biologist with California State Fish and Game Department on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2010. The project, at Eden Landing, just south of the San Mateo Bridge, is the latest step in the decades-long effort to restore 16,500 acres of former Cargill ponds back to natural conditions. Since 2003, when the state and federal government bought the lands, which make up more than 20 miles of the South Bay shoreline for \$100 million, they have spent another \$90 million on construction, planning, scientific studies and other restoration efforts. (Karen T. Borchers/Mercury News) (

KAREN T. BORCHERS)



American White Pelicans splash in the Bay water that flows into Eden Landing Salt Ponds, on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2010. The project, at Eden Landing, just south of the San Mateo Bridge, is the latest step in the decades-long effort to restore 16,500 acres of former Cargill ponds back to natural conditions. Since 2003, when the state and federal government bought the lands, which make up more than 20 miles of the South Bay shoreline for \$100 million, they have spent another \$90 million on construction, planning, scientific studies and other restoration efforts. (Karen T. Borchers/Mercury News) (KAREN T. BORCHERS)