

Levees broken, levees built at Eden Landing in Hayward

By Eric Kurhi
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HAYWARD -- Deep in the heart of the former salt ponds of Eden Landing, bulldozers, dump trucks and an enormous track loader are moving the earth to undo what humans did more than a century ago.

A bayside levee is going down, scoop by humongous scoop. A line of trucks receives the dirt -- it only takes two helpings from the loader to fill each dumper's 15-cubic-yard capacity. Then it's delivered along the narrow levee roads to a site about a mile away to build up another wall.

"It didn't cost much for the salt companies to build their levees," said John Bourgeois, project manager with the California Coastal Conservancy. "They weren't engineered, just put up to keep the water out. But the way we're doing it now, we want to make sure we're doing it right."

The wetlands restoration project's goal is to return the tidal marsh to its natural state, before salt operations started in the area in the 1850s. It's a project that's going on at former salt ponds south of the San Mateo Bridge. The latest levee work started earlier this month at Eden Landing, just south of the span.

There, the area nearest the Bay's influx will be allowed to flood unfettered, with the highest tide putting the area under about 6 inches of water. Further inland, new and improved levees still will be used to control the water, allowing it to be channeled selectively into various areas in a manner conducive to the restoration of flora and fauna.

While moving dirt

around sounds fairly straightforward, Austin Payne, an engineer with Ducks Unlimited, said the linear nature of the project makes it "surprisingly complex."

"A levee can only be chopped so much before it's unusable as a road. And as a conduit for construction, they're far from ideal in the first place -- any given day will see a truck stuck deep in an unpacked spot of mud, and the rainy season will bring an abrupt stop to work as the levee tops turn "slick as black ice," Payne said.

There's also much more to do than just tear down and build up levees. There are channels to be dug to facilitate natural flow, man-made channels to plug for the same reason, and a layer of salt residue as much as 4 inches thick needs to be broken up so plants can take root.

A main goal of the \$6.9 million, 630-acre project is the re-establishment of wildlife habitat, including that of the endangered clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse -- the "poster children of marsh restoration," said Jon Krause of the California Department of Fish and Game.

About five years down the line, they hope to also have creature comforts for humans who want to inspect the area, including a boardwalk that will run by the natural habitats as well as former salt works

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Pylons still stick up from a snow-white ground cover, and farther out on the flats are the X-shaped remnants of wind-driven Archimedes' screws that once pumped water.

"It's a cultural resource," Bourgeois said. "We're going to have interpretive panels for people to read about the history of the area, all kinds of good stuff."

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Construction crews work on a levee at the Eden Landing Ecological Reserve on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2010 in Hayward, Calif. (Aric Crabb/Staff)



Mt. Eden Creek stretches through the Eden Landing Ecological Reserve in Hayward, Calif. The former salt ponds will be restored to tidal marshes. (Aric Crabb/Staff)



John Krause Department of Fish and Game manager for the Eden Landing Ecological Reserve talks about the restoration effort of former salt ponds at the site on Tuesday Aug. 17, 2010 in Hayward, Calif. (Aric Crabb/Staff)



Pilings stretch out into an old salt pond at the Eden Landing Ecological Reserve on Tuesday Aug. 17, 2010, in Hayward, Calif. The former salt pond will be converted to a controlled pond during the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project. (Aric Crabb/Staff)