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Many Partnerships Involved in South Bay Restoration

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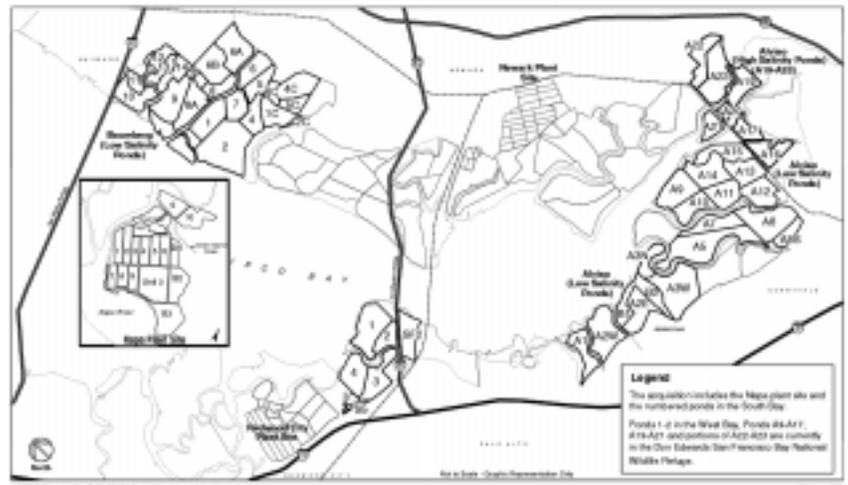
Over the past one hundred and fifty years, human activity has had a significant impact on the San Francisco Bay area. Once surrounded by nearly 200,000 acres of sprawling salt marshes and 100,000 acres of seasonal wetlands, vernal pools, creeks, and streams, today's Bay habitats stand greatly changed. Roughly eighty percent of the once expansive wetlands have disappeared and much of what remains has been significantly degraded. Development, pollution, filling, salt production, and the introduction of non-native plants and animals have all taken their toll on the embattled ecosystem. These practices continued unabated for nearly a century until scientists and citizens alike began to see the irreparable damage being done to the Bay area ecology.

Today, however, there is much reason for hope. In a widely anticipated agreement, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game have jointly acquired an extensive system of salt ponds in the South Bay and Napa areas from Cargill Salt, Inc. The Bay area now has an historic opportunity to restore great portions of these lands to their native, natural habitats. Comparable to projects in the Chesapeake Bay and Florida Everglades, the restoration of the South Bay will be one of the largest and most promising wetlands restoration projects undertaken.

Once restored, these lands will provide valuable ecological functions, offering habitat and abundant sources of food for fish and wildlife. Endangered and at-risk species will find homes in critical habitat set aside for their protection. Sustained by the rich ecosystem, countless numbers of shorebirds and waterfowl

from all over the Western Hemisphere will dot great expanses of the Bay landscape.

The restoration will also provide tangible economic benefits to South Bay communities. Restored wetlands will offer vital filters of urban runoff, purifying area water supplies. Acting as



natural water-control barriers, these lands will also help protect communities from flood damage. Another major component of restoration plans will provide for public access and recreation. Nature lovers, hikers, hunters, and birders will enjoy these areas for generations to come.

Essentially, humans now have the chance to "recreate nature" by expanding habitats that were nearly driven to the brink of permanent loss. In a rare reversal, land will be developed primarily for nature's sake. Restoration of the South Bay offers the opportunity to recreate one of the most biologically productive ecosystems on Earth.

Above: South Bay and Napa salt ponds acquired by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game

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The idea of restoring Bay area wetlands is not new however. To a large degree, this restoration project stands on the shoulders of decades of work and commitment by a wide array of partners. Similarly, its success will depend upon existing partnerships and the formation of many more to come.

The beginnings of South Bay restoration trace back to the early 1960s. A citizen-led

next several decades, this strategy was enhanced and expanded. Scientific proposals were published on what restoration would look like and how it would be achieved. “These groups desired to better define a vision,” reflects Don Edwards Refuge Manager Clyde Morris. “They laid the groundwork for many of the restoration projects in place today and for ones in years to come.” However, for their vision to be implemented, necessary lands would first have to be acquired.

Then in 1999, Cargill Salt Inc. approached the government about selling surplus salt ponds from its extensive salt-making properties. To modernize its San Francisco Bay operation, Cargill sought to consolidate production around its Newark plant. Negotiations between Cargill, the California Wildlife Conservation Board, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service continued for the next several years. U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein became personally involved in negotiations and also coordinated funding for the project. By May 2002, a preliminary agreement had been reached to purchase 16,500 acres (15,100 acres in the South Bay and 1,400 acres in Napa County) for \$100 million.

In addition to the initial negotiating partners, private foundations stepped forward to contribute necessary funds to secure the lands. A total of \$20 million was donated by private foundations, including the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, and the David and Lucille Packard Foundation. The State of California, through taxpayer-approved bond measures administered by the California Wildlife Conservation Board, contributed \$72 million towards the acquisition. An additional \$8 million came from Federal government appropriations.

With the purchase agreement completed, the restoration project has now entered the period whereby salt production on Cargill ponds is being phased-out and operations will begin to be transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game. The transfer is occurring on a pond-by-pond basis and is dependent upon Cargill lowering salinity levels in ponds to meet standards set by the Regional Water Quality Control Board. These standards will protect aquatic life from the adverse effects of water with excessive salt content being discharged into the Bay.

As each pond meets the water quality requirements, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game will begin to manage the lands. Lower salinity



Above From left: California Governor Gray Davis, U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Craig Manson, Chairman and CEO of Cargill Inc. Warren Staley, Lou Coleman of the Moore Foundation, and David Lewis of Save the Bay Association at announcement of acquisition (May 2002)

movement began to form with the shared vision of protecting remaining wetlands and restoring as much of these precious natural resources as possible. Citizen groups, particularly the South San Francisco Baylands Planning, Conservation and National Wildlife Refuge Committee (what would become the Citizen’s Committee to Complete the Refuge) and Save San Francisco Bay Association (Save the Bay), focused their efforts on educating the public and lobbying elected officials.

Public and political support continued to gather throughout the decade and in 1972 legislation was introduced by Congressman Don Edwards and area legislators to create the first urban National Wildlife Refuge. A bill was passed by the United States Congress, establishing what would later become Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. This would not be the final result of citizen efforts, but would prove a crucial starting point in the ambitious project of restoring the Bay to its natural splendor.

Further partnerships formed, involving citizens, scientists, and non-profit organizations. These groups worked together to construct a practical strategy for restoring the Bay. Over the

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ponds will be transferred in a relatively short period of time, most likely one to two years. Higher salinity ponds could require anywhere from three to seven years.

After the ponds are transferred, they will be operated under an Initial Stewardship Plan. If left unchanged, the current closed pond system would continue to produce salt indefinitely. In this Initial Stewardship phase, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game managers will stop salt production by circulating Bay waters through the ponds.

A long-term restoration plan is also in the works. The California State Coastal Conservancy, in partnership with the California Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is facilitating this process. With help from the scientific community, data collection and the use of predictive modeling will aid in planning the optimal mix of habitat types to best benefit wildlife. In developing this long-term plan, partners are committed to preparing a scientifically sound and publicly supportable restoration and public access plan that can begin to be implemented within five years.

In early April, the first series of public meetings was held to discuss the long-term restoration plan. Such meetings serve the dual purpose of both informing the public while providing them the opportunity to express their thoughts and concerns. "There will be a lot of effort to assure that there are many opportunities for the public to learn about the project and provide input as we move forward," says Carl Wilcox, Habitat Conservation Manager for the California Department of Fish and Game. "We want input in the earliest stages of the planning process."

The planning and implementation of restoration efforts are being closely coordinated among the California Coastal Conservancy, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We're partners in this," says Wilcox. "We are working very closely on the restoration as a whole." The long-term plan will provide a comprehensive blueprint for restoration. However, the implementation will be continually subject to scientific review. "It will be an adaptive restoration plan," says Refuge Complex Manager Marge Kolar. "Intensive, on-going monitoring will be conducted and processes will be adjusted accordingly to ensure that we are getting the results we want."

The sheer scale of the project necessitates an extensive network of partnerships. State and



federal agencies will form an executive leadership group which will serve as an umbrella encompassing all of the needed partnerships and aspects of the project. Local governments, especially flood control districts, will be consulted and directly involved in water control and flood management issues. A National Science Panel and local Technical Committee, both consisting of respected scientists, will assist the project team by independently reviewing the development and implementation of the long-term restoration plan. Federal and state agencies will coordinate their efforts with non-governmental organizations to help maintain public interest and support. Private foundations will offer financial backing and oversight, and the public at-large will provide input throughout the process.

The current steps forward in Bay area habitat restoration are due in large measure to the preceding decades of work and commitment. With the common interest of protecting our valuable natural resources, a diverse coalition continues to be at the forefront of Baylands stewardship. This coalition will only continue to grow. "We will need many partners," says Marge Kolar. "It is such an historic, large-scale project that will alter the landscape of the South Bay forever. To be successful, cooperation among a larger number of partners is essential."

Above: Proposed operational structure for the long-term restoration (Courtesy of California Coastal Conservancy)

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