



PRINTABLE VERSION: Thursday, September 13, 2007

6. **WETLANDS: Ambitious \$1.4B plan for San Francisco Bay caps decades of effort** (09/13/2007)

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

Over the past decade, federal, state and local agencies have devoted well over \$370 million to acquire and begin restoration of some 36,176 acres of wetlands and shorelines around the San Francisco Bay. Now the community organization that helped start the drive over 45 years ago recommends an even deeper investment -- amounting to \$1.43 billion over the next 50 years.

Save the Bay, started in a Berkeley, Calif., kitchen in 1961 by three local women who were short on experience but long on energy, has long since moved to more formal offices in Oakland. Hand-printed flyers have given way to professionally printed reports that gain widespread media coverage, and what was once a handful of activists grew steadily to involve thousands of volunteers who periodically target bay shore "hotspots" for cleanup activities. One early success was to lobby legislators and then-Gov. Ronald Reagan (R) to create a state-level agency, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, in 1969.

Save the Bay co-founder Sylvia McLaughlin recalled the start of the group. "We were galvanized by a city plan to fill 2,000 acres of the bay. The Army Corps of Engineers said that 70 percent of the bay was shallow enough to fill. We were appalled that filling in this resource was considered progress."



The shores of San Francisco Bay are still littered with trash and debris despite a generally successful effort by local communities to secure, clean and restore tidal wetlands. One group, Save the Bay, recently introduced a 50-year, \$1.4 billion plan to fund restoration of 36,000 acres for parks and wildlife refuges, but says the need is even greater. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

Now, over 45 years later, she still reminds politicians and residents alike that, "The bay is never saved; it's always in the process of being saved."

David Lewis, executive director of the group, on Aug. 31 hosted McLaughlin and other local environmental notables as part of the San Francisco Commonwealth Club's "Saving the Bay Again" forum Aug. 31. Like McLaughlin, Lewis contends that much more needs to be done. "We've spent 150 years trashing the bay," he said, but it remains a major attraction for visitors and local residents as well as a key component of the regional economy.

Save the Bay also released a report, called "**Greening the Bay**," that cited both "overwhelming public support" for added restoration efforts and a willingness to pay for the campaign. According to a poll conducted by EMC Research, Lewis noted, respondents said they would be willing to pay \$10 in fees or taxes per year to fund bay wetlands projects that lead to cleaner water and improved access. "The bay is deeply challenged, but it is deeply loved," he added.

Save the Bay, however, said its new proposal would come in at the equivalent of \$4 per year for each Bay

Area resident over 50 years to reach a goal of acquiring and restoring a total 100,000 acres.

When the original goal for a 100,000-acre habitat program was first articulated in 1999, it seemed a physical impossibility, as there was only 40,000 acres of total wetlands along the bay. However, local actions to restore tidal activity resulted in a consortium of government and nonprofit groups being able to purchase an additional 36,176 acres -- nearly doubling the

tidal marshes. The \$1.4 billion program proposed by Save the Bay would be devoted to completing these restoration projects at places like the former Cargill salt ponds in the South Bay -- purchased by the state department of Fish & Game in 2003 with \$150 million of federal funding -- and other secured sites. According to the group, nearly one-third of the current restoration projects, about 13,300 acres, are located in lands identified as the San Francisco National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

One of these refuges is the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge, which in 2003 grew by 30 percent thanks to federal acquisition of 9,600 acres. Other active projects include state and NGO funding for restoration of Bair Island marshes near Redwood City, the Napa-Sonoma March in the North Bay and a continuing effort to restore Yosemite Slough in San Francisco's economically distressed Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood ([Land Letter](#), Aug. 16).

Yosemite Slough was also identified this week by Save the Bay as one of 10 shore hotspots in desperate need of cleanup.

That means, however, a little more than 22,900 acres would still need to be purchased or preserved from development or have historic dikes removed to reach the 100,000-acre goal, but that will be a continuing challenge as available land is scarce and increasingly valuable for residential and commercial development.

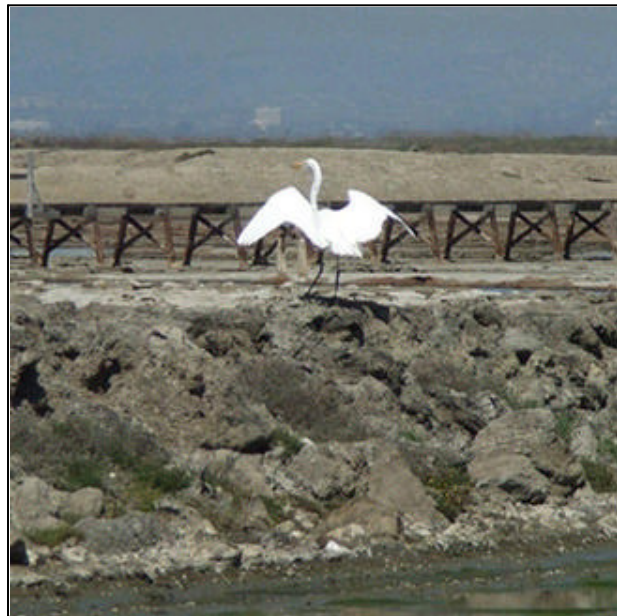
Save the Bay says that while lack of funding is the greatest obstacle to successful wetlands restoration, part of the barrier could be removed by creation of a single agency that can cross jurisdictional boundaries.

"San Francisco Bay lacks a single, regional body with the power to raise funds dedicated to restoring, maintaining and enhancing Bay shoreline sites," noted the new report. "It recommends immediate creation of a regional special district, using joint-powers authority, to explore public fundraising, develop priorities and sequence projects. Its governance structure should include representation from all levels of government and "appropriate stakeholders," the report states.

Top-down meets bottoms-up actions

Also appearing at the Commonwealth Club forum was former Rep. Pete McClosky, an active Republican environmental advocate in Congress from 1967 to 1982 who said he recently switched parties to become a Democrat, and Jared Blumenthal, director of San Francisco's Department of Environment.

Blumenthal cited a legacy of pollution that started as long ago as the Gold Rush that put an estimated 7,600 tons of toxic mercury into the bay -- and will remain a problem for another 150 years. Also, he said, more than 3 million gallons of oil products are dumped into the bay watershed each year. "In four years, we exceed the Valdez oil spill, going into the bay every time it rains."



SF Bay hosts over 500 species of migrating birds and a complex of federal wildlife refuges, such as the Don Edwards NWR. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

While Blumenthal offered a prescription heavy on personal responsibility -- such as driving less, using professional oil-changing stations that are required to recycle or properly dispose of oil, and "never buying another mercury-filled thermometer or thermostat" -- McClosky promoted national political actions to prohibit storm water runoff from entering waterways.

"It requires legislation to say that no city will allow storm water runoff," he said. But with the most powerful members of the U.S. House and Senate now representing the Bay Area, "We ought to be able to pass federal legislation," McClosky concluded.

Blumenthal added that the time appears ripe to force even recalcitrant lawmakers into becoming clean water advocates. "The opportunity now exists because people want to be seen as environmentalists. We need to put them up against their self image," he said.

Save the Bay co-founder McLoughlin endorsed both approaches, but also pitched the continuing education that propels each new generation of environmental activists. More than 20,000 Girl Scouts in Bay communities learn first hand about bay issues and many participate in coastal cleanup days, such as the multiple voluntary efforts sponsored by the organization over the next two weekends. "They are going to be better educated people," McLoughlin said. "And someday we won't need to have coastal cleanup days because people won't be throwing trash in the bay anymore."