

THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY JOINT VENTURE WETLANDS RESTORATION PROGRAM



The San Francisco Bay Estuary

San Francisco Bay, combined with the Delta, forms the West Coast's largest estuary, draining approximately 40% of the state's surface area. The Bay's resources enable the nation's fourth largest metropolitan region to pursue diverse activities including shipping, fishing, recreation and commerce and are, in part, responsible for the higher quality of life that attracts new residents.

The Bay hosts a rich diversity of flora and fauna and is one of the most important coastal wintering and migration areas for waterfowl and shorebirds. Nearly half of the birds of the Pacific Flyway and two-thirds of the state's salmon pass through the Bay. But these wetland resources have been severely impacted by conversion to agricultural and urban uses, flood control projects and water diversions. Tidal marsh acreage has been reduced from approximately 190,000 to 40,000, diminishing the Bay's productive capacity for fish and wildlife populations. Seasonal wetlands and riparian habitats have suffered similar losses, further impairing the Bay's ability to support its rich diversity of species. The result has been an increasing number of threatened and endangered species such as the California clapper rail, the salt marsh harvest mouse, the Delta smelt and several runs of chinook salmon to name a few.

For decades, the San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary has been at the heart of many battles over water diversions from the Estuary and the subsequent impacts on fish and wildlife populations. The Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA), passed in 1992, is notable because it was the first time that the needs of fish and wildlife would be factored into water deliveries. It still has not been implemented fully. In 1994, the historic Bay-Delta Accord was signed and the CALFED Bay-Delta Program was born. The CALFED Program is significant because all the stakeholders are at the table attempting to put an end to the long-standing water wars and millions of dollars have been committed to the ecosystem restoration. It is too soon to declare the program a success.

Restoring the Estuary

Hopeful signs are emerging. In 1987, the US EPA launched the San Francisco Estuary Project. It was an enormous undertaking that brought together diverse stakeholders from the environmental, business, agricultural and public resource and regulatory communities. The Estuary Project began a

collaborative, sometimes contentious, consensus process of over 100 stakeholders addressing the health of the Estuary. Five years and hundreds of meeting hours later, the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) for the San Francisco Estuary was signed by Governor Wilson and EPA Administrator Carol Browner. The CCMP outlines 145 actions to restore ecological health to the Estuary. The creation of the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture was one of these actions.

The Estuary Project's State of the Estuary Report, 1992-1997, estimates that approximately 8,000 acres of degraded or former wetlands have been restored and enhanced since 1993 within the larger Bay-Delta Estuary. Many more wetland acquisition and restoration projects are in various stages of development and several new programs aimed at protecting and restoring wetland habitat have emerged in recent years.

A comprehensive approach to restoring the Bay's wetland ecosystem will lead to numerous benefits in addition to those accruing to fish and wildlife populations. A healthy ecosystem reduces the number of threatened and endangered species, contributing to a reduction in land use conflicts, providing regulatory relief to the agricultural and business communities, ensuring more reliable water supplies of higher quality and maintaining the economic health of the Bay Area. The economic benefits of restoration can also be found in the role wetlands play in buffering the impact of floods, cleansing pollutants from runoff, recharging overdrawn water supplies and protecting against shoreline erosion.

Joint Venture Goals

The Joint Venture, a partnership of public agencies, environmental organizations, business groups and agricultural interests, is working to protect, restore, increase and enhance wetlands, riparian habitat and associated uplands in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Joint Venture is developing an Implementation Strategy, to be completed in fall 1998, outlining the acreage goals for protection and restoration necessary to increase fish and wildlife populations and begin restoring ecological health to the Bay. Through a combination of state, federal, local and private funding sources, Joint Venture partners are tackling a variety of projects ranging from watershed planning to levee breaching, aimed at restoring the ecological health of the Bay's wetland and riparian systems.

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Funding Needs

Early estimates indicate that if the ambitious goals of the Joint Venture are to be achieved, \$20 million a year over the next 20 years will be needed. \$20 million a year is undeniably a large sum but is comparable to, and in some cases, well below the annual funding levels for significant natural areas in other parts of the country. Funding from existing state, federal and private sources can be increased and new ones can be created. Joint Venture partners have identified several opportunities where state and federal sources could be increased.

Federal Funding Sources

Land and Water Conservation Fund. The LWCF is a great idea that has been historically underutilized. Revenues from offshore oil and gas development are directed to the LWCF, authorized at \$900 million annually. The reality is that funds are consistently appropriated under the \$200 million level and no funds have been appropriated in recent years for the State Program that provides matching grants up to 50% to state agencies and municipalities. Funding from LWCF will be used to complete the acquisitions of Bair Island and private lands within the boundaries of the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge, including the proposed expansion to the Marin Baylands. State program monies can be used to purchase and restore properties by the many local park districts in the Bay Area. LWCF should be funded at \$900 million with \$200 million allocated to the State Program.

North American Wetlands Conservation Act. NAWCA provides 50% matching grants to acquisition and restoration projects that increase wetland habitat quantity and quality. A popular funding source for joint ventures throughout the US, NAWCA is authorized at \$30 million a year but has been funded well below that level. The FY99 budget is at \$14.7 million, an increase of approximately \$3 million over recent years. A \$200,000 NAWCA grant pushed the Oro Loma Marsh Restoration Project in Hayward to completion. NAWCA is also up for reauthorization this year, with Senator John Chafee (R-RI) taking the lead. NAWCA's reauthorization and full funding at \$30 million will contribute significantly to meeting the Joint Venture's goals.

CALFED Bay-Delta Ecosystem Restoration Funding. The CALFED Bay-Delta Program is focusing the majority of its restoration activities upstream of the San Francisco Bay Ecosystem. However, Joint Venture partners have received some project funding from this source and support the \$143 million FY99 appropriation for ecosystem restoration.

1996 Farm Bill. This bill contains several programs that offer funding for the purchase of conservation and agricultural easements, known as the Wetlands Reserve Program and Farmland Protection Program, respectively. The bill also established the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), a financial incentive program for landowners that want to enhance or restore wildlife values on their properties. Funding levels for each of these programs should be increased.

Estuary Habitat Restoration Partnership Act of 1997 (S 1222). This bill, introduced by Sen. Chafee (R-R.I.) at the urging of the national group Restore America's Estuaries, is designed to encourage federal, state, local and private partnerships to restore 1 million acres of estuarine habitats by 2010. The bill would provide matching funds to state and other non-federal entities for estuarine restoration projects with the federal share ranging from 25 to 75%. Current funding authorization levels are \$40 million in FY99, \$50 million in FY00, and \$75 million in FY's 2001 through 2003.

State Funding Sources

Park Bond. State Senator Thompson's SB 2 is an \$850 million park bond providing much needed funding to the Coastal Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Board, two prominent Joint Venture partners. The bond also contains \$5 million to the Coastal Conservancy for projects that meet the goals of the Joint Venture.

Water Bond. State Senator Costa's SB 312 and Assembly Member Machado's AB 254 would provide funding for a multitude of water-related projects including nonstructural flood control alternatives. The Coastal Rivers and Streams Program of the bill would provide funds to mitigate past water control projects by restoring historic floodplains.

Bay Area Conservancy Program. The passage of SB 1048 last year created the Bay Area Conservancy Program at the Coastal Conservancy. The program supports Joint Venture projects but is currently unfunded. The Bay Area Conservancy Program should be funded from a park bond or through the state budget process.

Budget Process. The state budget should be used to identify and fund wetland acquisition and restoration projects.

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