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Wetland restoration will be first in Delta history

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OAKLEY — The first wetlands restoration project in the Delta promises to turn Dutch Slough into a learning laboratory that will provide scientists and the public a glimpse into the region's early ecology.

After years of planning, environmental documents for the project will be released in November and the initial funding has been secured. The 1,166-acre former cattle grazing and dairy operations in Oakley will be transformed into habitats for freshwater tidal marsh and sand dunes.

"We have specifically designed the restoration project to teach us more about the role of tidal marshes in the ecology of the Delta," Natural Heritage Institute restoration ecologist John Cain said. "We don't have significant natural tidal marsh in the Delta today to adequately measure how native fish use tidal marsh."

The \$30 million project should receive the bulk of its funding from Proposition 84, a safe drinking water and water quality act passed in 2006. It will be constructed in phases, with completion expected around 2012.

The construction process will include bringing in fill material, contouring the site, and breaching the levee.

The environmental report will cover how the plans will affect air quality, noise, dust, water quality, aesthetics and endangered species. The project's

main goals are to create habitats for species and improve the ecosystem there.

"It is not an experiment because we have a high level of confidence that it would result in a lot of benefits for the Delta," Cain said.

Scientific monitoring of the project will help guide future decisions on other large-scale, freshwater tidal restoration projects, according to Jeff Melby of the State Coastal Conservancy.

Scientists and experts have said Dutch Slough is a good beginning for tidal restoration.

"We have made a lot of changes, and that is why these species are in peril. This is the type of habitat that was there historically, and this is the type of habitat that will benefit these species," said Patty Quickert, a scientist with the California Department of Water Resources.

From the Gold Rush days to the 1950s, most of the tidal marsh was destroyed as Delta islands were reclaimed for agriculture and dredging was conducted for levee maintenance, Cain said. Most of the 538,000 leveed acres of the Delta were tidal marshes historically.

Dutch Slough is an ideal site for restoration, Cain noted.

"The lands at Dutch Slough are not as subsided as other areas of the Delta. It has the right elevation for tidal marsh restoration," he said.

Among the species that will benefit from the project is the Chinook salmon. Cain said the project will help juvenile salmon grow and return to the area every year.

It will also help freshwater duck species and the

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Sacramento split tail, he added. In addition to protecting native species, the project will not harm non-native species such as largemouth or striped bass. It will just give native fish a better chance of surviving among non-native ones.

"We hope that the project will also generate food web resources to benefit all of the fish that depend on the Delta ecosystem from largemouth bass to Delta smelt," Cain said.

Oakley officials have raised concerns about methyl mercury levels because of fears that wetlands cause mercury to be exported, but experts said this isn't a concern with Dutch Slough.

Dutch Slough has the lowest methyl mercury levels in this region of the Delta, Cain said, and recent studies indicate that tidal restoration can lessen the amount of mercury when designed properly.

Some of the greatest benefits of tidal marsh are in the areas of flood control and water quality, said Save the Bay Executive Director David Lewis.

"Re-creating this part of the Delta does improve water quality because it does reduce sediment and pollutants from the water," he said.

The project is a partnership among the Department of Water Resources, California Coastal Conservancy, Natural Heritage Institute and the city of Oakley. A newer partner in the project is the Ironhouse Sanitary District, which will provide fill material.

Public access and recreational opportunities are other benefits through a 55-acre community park and miles of Delta trail access. Oakley doesn't own the land for the park yet and its construction depends on future development in that area, so it is likely several years away from being completed, city officials said.

"We think this will be a great opportunity for people to see what the primeval Delta looked like, and give people the opportunity to safely view birds and go fishing," Cain said.

"The goal of the park is to create a destination for not only the people of Oakley but for people from all over the region."

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