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SAN FRANCISCO BAY: BIRD POPULATIONS DOUBLED SINCE 2003 IN VAST SALT POND RESTORATION AREA

By Paul Rogers

In a sign that the largest wetlands restoration project on the West Coast is already improving the health of San Francisco Bay, bird populations have doubled over the past 13 years on more than 15,000 acres of former industrial salt evaporation ponds that ring the bay's southern shoreline, scientists reported Thursday.

The overall population of ducks and shorebirds in that area, which is roughly the size of Manhattan -- has increased from roughly 100,000 in 2002 to 200,000 today, researchers found.

"It's really great," said Susan De La Cruz, a wildlife biologist in Vallejo with the U.S. Geological Survey who has conducted much of the research. "It shows that what's been done so far appears to be working."

In a landmark deal in 2003, Cargill Salt sold 15,100 acres of its bayfront salt ponds, which stretch from Hayward to San Jose to Redwood City, to state and federal agencies for \$100 million. That sale 12 years ago also included an additional 1,400 acres near Napa in the North Bay.

The idea was to take the ponds, which were used for a century to harvest salt for food, medicine and road de-icing, and restore them back to natural conditions over 50 years, bringing back birds, fish, harbor seals, leopard sharks and dozens of other species that have struggled in the bay as human development and population has expanded over generations.

San Francisco Bay has shrunk by one-third since the Gold Rush of 1849, due to diking, filling and development. Most of that stopped in the 1980s, with the advent of the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and other environmental laws. Now, scientists, environmental groups and many political leaders are literally trying to turn back the clock, and expand the bay out again, bringing back many of its wetlands, and with it more wildlife, public trails and natural flood control.

The restoration of the Cargill ponds is a central part of that undertaking.

The plan for the 15,100 acres, overseen by the state Coastal Conservancy and other agencies, calls for converting 90 percent of those ponds to tidal marsh by 2050.

Since 2003, state and federal agencies have spent \$93 million on that effort. They have taken two major steps. First, they opened up the more than 50 ponds, some of which are as big as 500 football fields each and are visible to airline passengers flying over the bay, to the bay's waters using tidal gates in levees, which stopped the salt-making process and brought in fish, shrimp, seeds of plants and other natural features.

Second, they have converted 3,750 acres -- about a quarter of the total project. Some of those lands, about 1,600 acres, have been restored to tidal marsh. Another 1,440 acres [have] been partially restored, and 710 acres are open ponds [that] have been reconfigured, with crews building islands and other features, or adjusting water levels and salinity, to help boost bird populations.

Thursday's research was unveiled at a gathering of dozens of scientists and policy makers at the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project's Science Symposium at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View.

"We're thrilled with the progress," said biologist John Bourgeois, executive project manager for the salt pond restoration effort. "The wildlife and habitat is responding faster than we anticipated."

Significant challenges still remain, however.

First is money. It will cost an estimated \$1 billion to finish the job over the next 40 years.

Environmentalists and business groups are planning to put a \$12 annual parcel tax on the June ballots in all nine counties that ring the bay. The measure will require a two-thirds majority to pass and would raise \$500 million toward wetlands restoration and flood control in the bay over the next 20 years.

Second, replacing the open water ponds with tidal marshes similar to pre-Gold Rush conditions benefits species that live in or around marshes, like fish, egrets, herons, harbor seals and leopard sharks. But the species that like the open water -- such as mallards, pintails, canvasbacks and other ducks, and shorebirds like stilts, avocets and sandpipers -- will have less habitat.

The way to address that, said De La Cruz, is to try and make those areas more hospitable so that as the acres change over the years, the same numbers of birds can still flourish. What scientists are learning now, through changing water levels, building islands and other techniques, can help inform future projects, she said.

Finally, other challenges remain. Mercury from long-dormant mining has built up in the mud across the bay and can't all be released at once. Some wetland areas can't be restored until more study flood control levees are built between them and communities.

Meanwhile, in a related project not on former Cargill lands, crews on Sunday plan to breach levees in the North Bay, restoring nearly 1,000 acres near Sears Point back to wetlands. That project will come a week after more than 100 scientists released a landmark report which said such restorations need to accelerate in the next 15 years to help reduce the risk of flooding to highways, roads and homes as sea level continues to rise due to climate change.