

YES on AA

CLEAN AND HEALTHY BAY

Vote YES on Measure AA
For a Clean and Healthy San Francisco Bay

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1ST-EVER PARCEL TAX TO RESTORE SAN FRANCISCO BAY HEADED TO VOTERS

By Peter Fimrite

A first-of-its-kind ballot measure that would use a parcel tax to pay for a suite of wetlands and habitat restoration projects on San Francisco Bay will be put before voters in all nine Bay Area counties, a government authority decided Wednesday.

The unprecedented move by the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority is an attempt to bring back some of the historic marshlands that once ringed the bay — and to shore up bay communities against expected sea level rise in future decades.

The authority, a special district formed by the state in 2009, agreed to ask voters on June 7 to approve a \$12-a-year parcel tax for 20 years to fund clean water projects, pollution prevention programs and the restoration of some 35,000 acres of wetlands along the bay.

The district's governing board, which includes representatives of every region in the Bay Area, approved the ballot measure by a 6-0 vote at a meeting in Oakland, with the South Bay position vacant.

"It is a once in a generation opportunity to support a restoration of the bay," said Adrian Covert, policy director for the Bay Area Council, which supports the measure. "By harnessing nature, we can improve the bay ecosystem for our children while also making the Bay Area one of the most climate-resilient regions on Earth. This is our opportunity to do something big."

San Francisco Supervisor Scott Wiener, the West Bay representative, called it a "historic" opportunity for the entire Bay Area "to bring the bay back to its majesty."

Bay in 'severe jeopardy'

"The health of the bay is in severe jeopardy," he said. "We have neglected it and lost much of the wetlands, and it is time to turn the tide."

The proposed initiative, which is also supported by Save The Bay, Silicon Valley Leadership Group and Ducks Unlimited, would raise \$500 million over 20 years for a host of projects, including efforts to clean trash, decrease pollution and harmful toxins, improve water quality and restore fish, bird and wildlife habitat.

Improved shoreline access and flood control would also be funded, but the largest portion of the tax would go toward the restoration of thousands of acres of tidal marshes on former hay fields in the North Bay, salt ponds in the South Bay and diked-off areas from the Petaluma River to Santa Clara.

Two-thirds of the combined voters in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, Sonoma and San Francisco counties would have to approve the measure, a difficult task that supporters believe may be eased by a booming tech economy and a liberal, environmentally inclined populace.

"This parcel tax will bring in more money, a reliable funding source and it could be used as a leverage for federal matching funds," said Ian Wren, a staff scientist for the environmental group San Francisco Baykeeper. "But if we want to accomplish everything we want to accomplish, we're going to need even more money than this parcel tax can provide."

The tax, though, is the boldest effort yet to make progress on a regional goal of restoring 100,000 acres of former wetlands around San Francisco Bay within 50 years, an undertaking that government officials estimate will cost \$1.5 billion.

Bay during Gold Rush

The restoration goal remains well shy of the 350,000 acres of bay wetlands that conservationists believe existed before the Gold Rush, but ecologists believe 100,000 acres of marshland around the bay would be enough to create a healthy, self-sustaining ecosystem.

Tidal marshes are vital to migratory birds and various rodents, fish and invertebrates, according to conservationists.

The Bay Area lost about 85 percent of the marshlands when they were drained, dried out for farmland or paved over for urban development in the 19th and 20th centuries. It was a catastrophe for shorebirds and rodents like the salt marsh harvest mouse. The primary landing areas for thousands of migrating waterfowl along the Pacific Flyway were cut off.

1 million shorebirds

Today, there are only about 35,000 acres of wetlands, tidal mudflats and shallow ponds left around San Francisco Bay. They are home to about 1 million shorebirds every year. The abundant food and habitat in wetland areas also help sustain commercial fisheries, like herring.

A concerted effort has been made over the past two decades to improve the situation. Large swaths of former hay fields, salt ponds and abandoned military bases have been restored in the Napa and Suisun areas, along the Petaluma River and in the South Bay.

Some 30,000 acres of shoreline flats once owned by salt manufacturers Leslie and Cargill are ready to be restored, but bay advocates say there is no money available to do the job.

Wren said the San Francisco area now gets about \$5 million a year in water quality improvement funds from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, considerably less than other major projects such as Chesapeake Bay, the Great Lakes, Puget Sound and the Florida Everglades.

But it isn't only wildlife that ballot measure proponents are worried about. Bay marshlands filter out pollutants, sequester carbon and act like giant sponges, protecting communities, roadways and businesses from flooding.

The rising sea

Flooding is a critical issue given that a 2011 study predicted that the tidal marshes of San Francisco Bay would virtually disappear within a century if the sea rises as high as some scientists predict.

The study, by Point Blue Conservation Science, said the rising sea would eliminate 93 percent of the bay's tidal wetlands if carbon emissions continue unchecked and the ocean rises 5.4 feet, as predicted by scientists under a worst-case scenario. Areas closest to the Golden Gate, including Richardson Bay in Marin County and much of the East Bay coastline, were the most vulnerable, the study said.

8 inches in a century

Climate scientists say the sea level at the mouth of San Francisco Bay has already risen almost 8 inches over the past century. Studies have shown that a major storm — the kind that strikes once in 150 years — could cause as much as \$10.5 billion in damage to Bay Area coastline, Covert said.

“What we've found out is that a lot of these wetlands projects also have a dual benefit, which is flood protection,” Covert said. “The Bay Area, with a little investment, can position itself as one of the most climate-resilient coastal regions in the world, and we can do it all by making the bay a healthier place for swimming, for boating, for fish and for wildlife.”