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Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle

Water from the Dutchman Slough in Solano County begins to flow at Cullinan Ranch last year after tidal flow was introduced to a 1,500-acre wetland. Marshes offer crucial wildlife habitat.

Talk with anyone working to restore marshes and wetlands along San Francisco Bay, and they'll say there's no shortage of projects that are all but ready to go — except for the lack of funds.

If Measure AA passes on June 7, that job gets easier to the tune of roughly \$25 million a year.

“This would be a huge benefit for us,” said John

Bourgeois, project manager for the California State Coastal Conservancy's efforts to convert 15,000 acres of South Bay salt ponds to a [seminatural condition](#). "We own the property, we have the plan in place, and we know how to do this kind of restoration. The missing piece is money."

The measure would create a parcel tax across the Bay Area of \$12 per parcel for the next 20 years. The money raised would be dispensed across the region on an annual basis to projects with measurable environmental benefits in terms of wildlife habitat, public access and "protecting communities from flood." Like other such tax proposals in California, it needs a "yes" from two-thirds of voters to become law.

A nine-county measure of this sort is a first for the Bay Area. It also differs from such tax initiatives as countywide transportation improvements that spell out exactly who gets what down the road. The idea with Measure AA is to replenish a pool of money each year available for projects deemed worthy, whether it provides the final bit of cash for a restoration effort or helps attract federal and state funding.

The approach also makes sense, proponents say, given the huge body of water that would benefit — a placid-looking estuary that stretches from San Jose to Petaluma, the Golden Gate to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

“People view the bay and its shoreline as a regional asset and a regional symbol,” said David Lewis, executive director of the advocacy group [Save the Bay](#). “We all see it, and we all share it in that regard.”

Leaving nothing to chance

The tax has long been a goal of local environmentalists eager for a guaranteed stream of financial support for restoration efforts, and the [San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority](#) was created by the state Legislature in 2008 to dispense funds should an ongoing source exist. But the recession put the initiative on hold.

Even now, given the novelty of the nine-county approach and the requirement of a “supermajority” of voter support, the pro-AA campaign is leaving nothing to chance. Extensive polling occurred before the \$12 figure was chosen, as well as the decision to pursue a flat parcel tax rather than something keyed to the value of individual properties. Roughly \$2.5 million has been raised for the campaign, and endorsements have been collected from more than 600 individuals, organizations and government bodies — a cross-section that ranges from U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein and the Oakland Chamber of Commerce to 57 environmental groups.

The only opposition at this point is a loose alliance of

groups opposed to new taxes and people wary of anything that smacks of regional government, especially one with tax revenue flowing its way.

“The concern for us isn’t taxes but regionalism, the fact that we’d be losing local control,” said Marcy Berry of the [Nine-County Coalition](#), formed this year in response to Measure AA. As for the idea that the bay’s challenges reach beyond county lines, Berry called that “a spurious argument. We still have a form of government that says each local community has a say.”

Urgency of climate change

If there’s a way in which this year’s campaign differs from what we might have seen when the parcel tax idea was conceived, it’s the emphasis on the likelihood of sea level rise in the coming decades. Unless the pace of marsh restoration picks up in coming years, environmentalists say, there will be less of a chance to create ecologically adaptable wetlands along the bay as it expands.

“A decade ago, we were still explaining the local impact that climate change would have,” Lewis said. “What has changed is that more of the public and our elected officials have come to recognize the urgency posed by sea level rise.”

The campaign isn't shy about playing this card, with one flyer emphasizing the need to "protect our shoreline in the future." Scientists make the same point.

"We need to restore as much as we can by 2030 to get ahead of the sea level rise curve" that forecasts the increase gaining speed after 2050, Bourgeois said. "If I restore a salt pond today, it's going to be 20 years before it is truly well established."

At the same time, Save the Bay's Lewis knows that distant dangers are no match for a kayak ride or the sight of reeds rippling near the road.

"For most voters, sea level rise isn't the top motivator," Lewis said. "They want the bay to be clean and healthy."