

Marin Voice: Measure AA will help keep our bay clean and healthy

Bay Area voters in Tuesday's election have an opportunity to make history. For the first time, the nine-county Bay Area will be asked to dedicate sustainable funding for the preservation and restoration of San Francisco Bay.

Measure AA represents the first common-sense regional solution to a regional problem — how to ensure the long-term survival of our great bay in the face of myriad environmental threats. The paving over of the bay's wetlands has increased flood risks in low-lying areas, and marshland and retired salt ponds now sit barren for lack of funds to restore them.

Scientists agree the bay needs at least 100,000 acres to keep it healthy. There are only 44,000 acres of bay wetlands now, but another 30,000 acres are ready to be restored.

The only missing ingredient is funding.

If passed, Measure AA would impose a \$1 monthly parcel tax in the nine counties that surround the bay to restore wetlands around the bay — a small price to ensure that future generations share in the benefits of a clean and healthy bay.

That buck a month would raise \$500 million over the next 20 years for the protection of the bay's shorelines and the restoration of vital habitat for birds, fish and other wildlife. Pollution from harmful chemicals like PCBs, mercury, and pesticides has put the bay's fish and wildlife at serious risk, and restoring bay wetlands is critical to reduce the toxins that threaten them.

Measure AA funds would also be used to enhance public recreation areas and add miles of new trails to improve shoreline access — making it easier for all of us to hike, bike, fish, see wildlife and visit the bay.

Importantly, the sustainable regional funding source would be used to obtain hundreds of millions of dollars in matching federal environmental grants, giving the Bay Area its fair share of dedicated funding that has historically been used for other regions.

A unique coalition of elected leaders, environmentalists, business groups and labor leaders has formed in support of Measure AA, a testament to its importance in assuring the bay's long-term survival. A flat parcel tax was chosen in part because it simplifies the process and allows everyone to take part in the bay's restoration.

Supporters of the bay spent years evaluating the best method to fund a bay restoration program that was fair and equitable for the entire region, not just a few of the more wealthy areas.

As a result, the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority was formed by the Legislature to oversee the distribution of funding.

The authority is made up a board of elected representatives from all regions around the bay, including the North Bay. The enabling legislation ensures that none of the funds collected by the authority can be siphoned off for uses outside the Bay Area.

Decisions will be made in full view of the public at duly advertised meetings, and an independent citizens' oversight committee will ensure the funds are used fairly and appropriately.

Set criteria have been established to evaluate priority projects, including those that have the greatest public impact in terms of clean water, improving wildlife habitats and benefiting disadvantaged communities.

The bay is the central touchstone of our region and our greatest natural treasure.

Measure AA will ensure that our children and grandchildren will inherit a clean and healthy bay that will be part of their lives as it is part of ours. Our bay and its surrounding environs need our help, and time is running out.

That's why the League of Women Voters in Marin County enthusiastically supports Measure AA and urges all county voters to vote yes with your mail ballot or on June 7.

V-Anne Chernock of Novato is the incoming president of the League of Women Voters of Marin County.