

SAN FRANCISCO BAY CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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TO: All Design Review Board Members
FROM: Will Travis, Executive Director [415/352-3653 travis@bcdc.ca.gov]
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SUBJECT: **Napa- Sonoma Marshes Restoration Project, Phase III, Napa County**
(For Board consideration on August 9, 2010)

Project Summary

Applicants: California Department of Fish and Game and the Army Corps of Engineers

Project Representatives: Larry Wyckoff, California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG); Francesca Demgen, URS Corporation; and Suzanne Von Rosenberg, GAIA Consulting, Inc.

Project Site. The proposed project is located within the Napa-Sonoma Marshes Wildlife Area, just west of the Napa River, near the Napa-Sonoma County line. (Exhibits 1 and 2). The Napa-Sonoma Marshes is comprised of 9,450 acres of former salt ponds that were once operated by Cargill, Inc. In June 2005, the Commission authorized the restoration and conversion Ponds 1, 1A, 2, 3, 4 and 5 to managed ponds/tidal marsh. In January 2008, the Commission authorized the restoration and conversion of the Napa Plant Site (Ponds 9 through 10), Ponds W1, W2 and W3, and Ponds CB1 through CB9, B1 through B3 and Unit 3. The proposed project would convert the remaining former salt ponds, Ponds 6, 6A, 7, 7A and 8, to managed ponds, providing 1,900 acres of improved fish and wildlife habitat (Exhibit 5).

Project Purpose. The goals of the proposed project are to: (1) improve habitat for fish and wildlife; (2) increase waterfowl and shorebird habitat management capabilities; and (3) provide improved public access and interpretative opportunities.

Project Status. The Commission will likely hold a public hearing and vote on the project sometime this year. This will be the Design Review Board (Board)'s first review of the proposed project.

Proposed Project. The proposed project design was created to allow Ponds 7, 7A and 8 to be maintained as managed ponds for waterfowl and shorebird use. Ponds 6 and 6A comprise a single island surrounded by sloughs and would continue to be managed for wildlife over the next ten years, after which time management of these ponds would be reevaluated. To accomplish the proposed design, the following improvements are proposed: (1) internal and external water control structures and gates; (2) solar-powered fish screens; (3) a mixing chamber that would allow for the mixing and dilution of bittern contained in Pond 7 prior to its release into the Napa River; (4) excavation of existing channels; (5) levee repair; and (6) public access (as described below).



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Existing Public Access. The entire project area is currently accessible to the public from multiple public roads and waterways, and is a popular fishing, hunting, boating and bird watching destination in the North Bay (Exhibit 3). Ponds 7 and 7a are currently open for hunting during the months of October through January. Ponds 7, 7A and 8 are currently accessible by land via informal footpaths on the top of existing levees. Currently, the surfaces of the footpaths are either earthen or graveled for maintenance access, are of inconsistent width and height and are not ADA-compliant. (Photographs 8 through 11, and 12 through 30). Ponds 6 and 6A are island ponds that are not accessible by land but are accessible by boat. Two public boat launch ramps exist at Cuttings Wharf and on Hudeman Slough (Exhibit 4). There is a privately-owned duck club on the northeastern portion of Pond 6A.

Two parking areas exist within the project area that enables recreational access to the site. A formal, CDFG-managed parking lot is located just north of Pond 7A and is accessible from Buchli Station Road (Photos 1 through 7). This parking lot contains 16 regular parking spaces and one handicap-designated space as well as a restroom facility. An informal parking area is located at the end of Milton Road (near Pond 8). While visitors to Ponds 8 utilize this parking area, it is technically prohibited since it is located on a County-owned road (Photos 31 through 38).

Proposed Public Access. The following public access is proposed:

1. Improve 5,654 linear feet of levee embankment/trail along Ponds 7 and 7A. The levee trails would be 10 feet in width, ADA-compliant and would receive an ADA-appropriate gravel surface treatment. The internal levee bisecting Ponds 7 and 7A currently provides nesting habitat for the state and federally-endangered California least tern and the federally-threatened Western snowy plover. The ponds are currently proposed as a Critical Habitat Unit for these species with the USFWS. To protect this nesting habitat, the internal levee would be closed to access between March 1 through September 1, annually (Exhibit 7).
2. Improve 6,110 linear feet of levee embankment/trail along Pond 8. The levee trails will be 10 feet in width, ADA-compliant and would receive an ADA-appropriate gravel surface treatment.
3. Four interpretative signs describing the history, ecology and restoration of the site would be provided. Three signs would be placed along the eastern side of Ponds 7/7a and one sign would be placed along the southern tip of Pond 8 (Exhibit 8).

Issues. The staff believes that the project raises the following public access issues.

1. **Do the public access areas provide adequate, useable and attractive public access spaces?** The *San Francisco Bay Plan* Public Access policies state that "A proposed fill project should increase public access to the Bay to the maximum extent feasible...." Further, the *Public Access Design Guidelines* state that public access spaces should be "designed and built to encourage diverse, Bay-related activities along the shoreline", to create a "sense of place", and "designed for a wide range of users". The *Guidelines* further state that "[v]iew opportunities, shoreline configuration and access points are factors that determine a site's inherent public access opportunities."

The applicants are proposing to improve 11,764 linear feet of levee trails and provide interpretative signage.

The Board's advice is sought on whether the proposed public access is sufficient to accommodate the expected level of use, designed to take advantage of the rural nature of the site and whether the locations of the interpretative signage are appropriate to maximize the public access user's experience.

2. **Are the connections and signage to the proposed public access adequate to lead the public to and along the project site?** The *Public Access Design Guidelines* state that, “access areas are utilized most if they provide direct connections to public rights-of-way such as streets and sidewalks...” and “should be planned in collaboration with local governments” to provide for future connections. The *Guidelines* further state that this may be accomplished by “providing connections perpendicular to the shoreline at regular intervals...to maximize the opportunities for accessing and viewing the Bay.”

The project site is located in an isolated area south of the City of Napa and is accessed from Buchli Station Road (Ponds 6, 6a, 7 and 7A) and Milton Road (Pond 8). While the applicant is proposing interpretative signage on-site, a way-finding signage is program is not proposed at this time.

The Board should advise the staff on whether additional way-finding signage or other way finding program (e.g., website tutorial) would improve the public access user’s ability to use and experience the site.

3. **Is the design of the public access compatible with wildlife?** The *San Francisco Bay Plan* policies on public access state that, “public access should be sited, designed and managed to prevent significant adverse effects on wildlife.” In many locations around the Bay, the shoreline edge is a vital area for wildlife. Access to some wildlife areas allows visitors to discover, experience and appreciate the Bay’s natural resources and can foster public support for Bay resource protection. However, in some cases, public access may have adverse effects on wildlife (including flushing, increased stress, interrupted foraging, and/or nest abandonment), and may result in adverse long-term population and species effects. Methods for avoiding adverse effect of public access on wildlife include: (1) using design elements to encourage or discourage specific types of human activities; (2) providing spur trails to reduce informal access into and through more sensitive areas; (3) using physical design features to buffer wildlife from human use; (4) managing type and location of public use; and (5) incorporating educational and interpretive elements within public access areas.

The public access proposed at the site would be adjacent to sensitive wildlife habitat and one of the levees bisecting Ponds 7 and 7a currently provides nesting habitat for the Federally-threatened snowy plover.

The Board’s advice is sought on whether the public access has been designed to minimize potential impacts on wildlife.