

SAN FRANCISCO BAY CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

50 California Street • Suite 2600 • San Francisco, California 94111 • (415) 352-3600 • Fax: (415) 352-3606 • www.bcdc.ca.gov

July 30, 2010

TO: All Design Review Board Members

FROM: Will Travis, Executive Director [415/352-3653 travis@bcdc.ca.gov]
Max Delaney, Coastal Program Analyst [415/352-3668 maxd@bcdc.ca.gov]

SUBJECT: The Cullinan Ranch Restoration Project (First Review)
(For Board consideration on August 9, 2010)

Project Summary

Applicant: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

Project Representatives: Renee Spent, Ducks Unlimited, Inc.; Don Brubaker, USFWS

Project Status. A draft EIS/EIR was prepared in April 2008 and the final environmental document was certified in April 2010. Staff received a request for a material amendment to BCDC Consistency Determination CN 5-04 on March 3, 2010. The project will likely be considered by the Commission in September 2010 with initial phases of construction to commence shortly thereafter.

Project Site. The Cullinan Ranch site is located within the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge near the northern shore of San Pablo Bay in the Counties of Solano and Napa (Exhibits A and B). The project site is bordered to the north by South Slough and Dutchman Slough, to the west by Pond 1 (owned by the California Department of Fish and Game), to the east by the Guadalcanal Village tidal marsh (owned by the California Department of Transportation), and to the south by Highway 37 (Exhibit C).

The 1,579-acre site was historically dominated by tidal marsh habitat. These wetlands and surrounding sloughs were diked off in the late nineteenth century and again in the 1940's so the site could be used for agriculture, primarily oat and hay production. Due to these activities, portions of the site have subsided as much as six feet in elevation. The site is currently a mix of seasonal wetlands, upland, emergent marsh, open water and tidal and remnant tidal marsh. The Commission has certain waterway jurisdiction along South Slough and Dutchman Slough and shoreline band jurisdiction along the southern edge of the site (which extends into the site from the tidal marsh immediately south of Highway 37). The site is located within an area that is designated as a wildlife refuge priority-use area by the *San Francisco Bay Plan*.

Proposed Project. The USFWS is proposing to restore approximately 1,549 acres of tidal habitat and 26 acres of associated upland habitat. Restoration activities would involve: (1) excavating and enlarging channels within the former ranch; (2) lowering the levees along Dutchman and South Sloughs and excavating four 100-foot-wide breaches along these levees; (3) lowering the levee between Cullinan Ranch and the Guadalcanal marsh site and excavating one 100-foot-wide breach; (4) placing ditch blocks in old agricultural drainage channels; (5) constructing a 3,500-foot-long buttress levee along the southeastern corner of the site and placing rip rap protection along the remaining southern border to prevent the flooding of Highway 37; (6) strengthening, resurfacing and installing water control structures within the Pond 1 levee along the western edge



Making San Francisco Bay Better

of the site; and (7) placing material to raise portions of site to elevations appropriate for vegetation colonization.

Existing Public Access. Public access at the Cullinan Ranch site currently exists along a 7,000-foot-long gravel trail along the Pond 1 levee at the west end of the site (Exhibit C). At the south end of this trail, there is a small paved parking lot with spots for approximately ten vehicles. A locked gate precludes public vehicles from driving out onto the Pond 1 levee, however, an ADA-compliant pedestrian gate allows access for bikers and pedestrians onto the levee (Exhibit D). At the east end of the site, within the neighboring Guadalcanal Village site, there is a 1,954-foot-long by 12-foot-wide grassy levee top immediately adjacent to Highway 37 that is currently open to the public, a public access area seating area, and parking lot for eight vehicles, all of which currently are owned and maintained by the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) but slated for transfer to the USFWS in the near future.

Previously Required Public Access Improvements. In 2004, the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) was required to construct two 75-square-foot kayak launches as a condition of BCDC Permit 8-04. In 2006, when it was determined that the average depth of the Pond 1 site is too shallow for kayaks, the permit was amended to allow the CDFG to construct the kayak launches in the Cullinan Ranch site instead. As part of the Cullinan Ranch Project, the USFWS will receive funds from the CDFG to construct an approximately 1,950-square-foot wooden, pile-supported kayak launch on the east side of the Pond 1 levee (Exhibits E and I). Since the site has subsided considerable over the past century, most of the site is expected to remain as open water and accessible to kayaks and hand boats for decades after the site is breached. The USFWS would excavate a channel connecting from the kayak launch to a nearby tidal channel in an effort to ensure that kayak access would be maintained even as sediment accretes and marsh plain forms throughout the site (Exhibit F). If sedimentation occurs faster than expected and kayak channel becomes too shallow for boats, the kayak launch would be moved to another location at that time.

Proposed Public Access. The Cullinan Ranch site is currently closed to the public. The project proposes to open the site to non-motorized human-powered boats once the initial restoration work has been completed (i.e. the site has been breached to allow the influence of tidal action). In addition, the USFWS is proposing the following new public access improvements as part of their restoration project: (1) a 750-foot-long acceleration and a 650-foot-long deceleration lanes along State Route 37; (2) an additional earthen kayak launch ramp, an approximately 1,350-square-foot overlook and three benches at the north end of the Pond 1 levee trail; (3) a 1,000-square-foot wooden, pile-supported viewing platform and informational kiosk near the parking lot; (4) a 1,200-square-foot wooden, pile-supported fishing pier on the east side of the Pond 1 levee; and (5) an ADA-accessible surface on the approximately 600 linear feet of the Pond 1 levee road (Exhibits E, F, G, H and J). In addition, the project would include interpretive and directional signage in various locations around the site.

In addition, the USFWS is currently in the process of determining the feasibility of improving public access at the east end of the project site. Potential improvements may include: (1) an approximately 1760-foot-long by 8- to 12-foot-wide trail on top of an existing levee within the Guadalcanal Village site and a wooden, pile-supported fishing pier at the north end; (2) access on the proposed 3,500-foot-long buttress levee; and/or (3) a new public access area at an alternative location (such as within the privately-owned parcel to the east called Pritchett Marsh, River Park in Vallejo, or along the shoreline of Mare Island) to provide a better access connection from Vallejo to the site (Exhibits K and L). Depending on the final design of the public access at the east end, the project would likely include reconfiguring the existing entrance gate (fencing) and

installing a kiosk and interpretive signage in order to provide a clearly defined trailhead (Exhibit N).

Design Review Issues. At the Design Review Board's first review of this project, the Board's comments are sought on the proposed public access improvements, listed above. Additionally, the Board should be mindful of the following applicable policies and guidelines during this initial review:

1. **Adequate, Usable, 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."

Currently, public access exists along the entire 7,000-foot-long gravel Pond 1 levee trail, however, there are no seating or viewing areas. The USFWS proposes to create a viewing platform, kayak launch, and fishing pier and provide ADA-accessible surfacing over a 600 section of trail at the southern end and construct an overlook with 3 benches and a second kayak launch at the northern end. At the eastern end of the site, there is currently access within the Guadalcanal Village site but not within the Cullinan Ranch site itself. The USFWS is currently considering options to improve the public access in this vicinity.

The Board's advice is sought on whether the proposed public access is sufficient to accommodate the expected level of use, whether the project provides adequate, usable and attractive public access areas, and whether the project has been designed to take advantage of the rural nature of the site.

2. **Connections to the Proposed Public Access Areas.** 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 Pond 1 levee trail and parking area is currently only accessible from Highway 37. The USFWS is proposing to construct deceleration and acceleration lanes along Highway 37 in order to allow safer vehicular access to this parking area. There is currently no connection between the Pond 1 levee and the eastern portion of the site. The USFWS is not proposing public access along Highway 37 due to the high costs of reinforcing the levee and other logistical considerations (such as safety and the fact that the levee is within the CalTrans right-of-way).

The Board's advice is sought on whether or not the project improves connections to public rights-of-way and the surrounding vicinity.

3. **Wildlife Compatibility.** 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 site currently consists of poor quality freshwater habitat and minimal tidal habitat. In the near-term, tidal marsh creation is expected to occur along South Slough and Dutchman sloughs and adjacent to the Guadalcanal Village site. Much of the site is expected to accrete slowly and, therefore, remain open water to provide migratory bird habitat for several decades. Salt marsh harvest mouse currently inhabit the restored tidal marsh areas within the Guadalcanal Village site to the east.

The Board's advice is sought on whether or not the public access areas are designed to include adequate buffers between human use and wildlife and whether the project provides the appropriate designated access areas to reduce informal access into and through sensitive habitat areas.