

# Levee breach transforms Sears Point farmland back into wetlands

**Derek Moore and Diane Peterson, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 10-26-15**

Cooled by a stiff breeze off San Pablo Bay, about 300 supporters and partners of the Sonoma Land Trust cheered on Sunday as an excavator's crane broke through a 140-year-old Sears Point levee, allowing saltwater to flood back over 1,000 acres of reclaimed oat hay fields at the southern tip of Sonoma County.

As the water rushed in, the crowd of government officials and others involved in the decade-old Sears Point Restoration Project threw balls of pickleweed seeds into the mud to aid the wetland's rebirth.

It is expected to take another 25 to 30 years before the marshland's vegetation and wildlife comes back completely, but a flock of sandpipers swept in Sunday to investigate the small levee breach, which will be widened to 285 feet.

"Historically, over a quarter of the bay's estuarine habitat was up here at the north end of the bay," said Don Brubaker, the National Wildlife Refuge manager for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, one of about two dozen partners in the project. "We're going to see ducks coming in, and wading birds like herons and egrets ... eventually, salmon could move in here."

About 1,000 members of the public were expected at a tour of the levee site later Sunday. The morning breach was just the start of the work planned this week by the Sonoma County Land Trust, which plans to lower about a mile of the old levee and cut another 285-foot breach along Tolay Creek.

During the past three years, the Sonoma County Land Trust has excavated a channel for the tidal water to enter the field and used the soil to build a new levee protecting the railroad tracks about a mile to the north, which will become the new northern edge of San Pablo Bay.

Public access to the site is expected in early 2016, once safety measures at a railroad crossing are added.

Sunday's celebration started at 10:30 a.m. with a festive brunch and a string of speakers from various organizations and government, including Congressman Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena; state Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Solano; Assemblyman Bill Dodd, D-Napa; and Sonoma County Supervisor David Rabbitt.

Officials praised the restoration project's many benefits, saying it will lessen the impact of rising sea levels, protect against floods, filter runoff pollution and attract wildlife.

"We are putting a big down payment toward our sea-level-rise insurance policy," said Jared Blumenfeld, the southwest regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency.

"I have spent a lot of time trying to make levees bigger and stronger, so this is ironic," Wolk said. "But what we learned with (Hurricane) Katrina is that when the Mississippi Delta was eliminated, that created more of a problem when the sea rose."

Sears Point was long coveted by developers as the potential site for a number of projects, including an airport, race track and a 6,000-resident Mediterranean-style village.

In 2003, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria announced the purchase of 2,000 acres off Highway 37 for \$24 million with the financial backing of Station Casinos, with plans to develop a 1,900-slot casino and 200-room hotel at the site. The tribe promised to keep 1,700 acres in open space and to be good stewards of the land.

But those plans garnered loud protest from government entities, including supervisors in every surrounding county, as well as from a coalition of environmental groups. The Sonoma Land Trust co-authored a white paper outlining environmental issues surrounding the proposed casino site.

In an interview Friday, Greg Sarris, tribal leader of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, said the tribe did not understand the “environmental circumstances” at Sears Point when it put up a down payment to purchase the property. He said he dropped the development plans “the very minute I understood the environmental implications of building anything whatsoever” at that location.

The tribe ended up donating its \$4 million option on the property to the land trust, as well as another \$75,000. The tribe ultimately built a casino in Rohnert Park that opened for business in 2013.

Today, the only evidence of a casino at Sears Point is an advertisement for the Graton Casino splashed across a billboard along Highway 37 near Sonoma Raceway. “Your best days happen here!” the sign reads.

The “here” is some 26 miles away, in Rohnert Park.

Sarris said he “couldn’t be happier” with the way things turned out at Sears Point, calling the restoration a “collaboration between the native people and non-native people to restore a place that can be a sustainable home for all of us. It’s the only way to go.”

Standing at the site of the levee breach Friday, Julian Meisler, a program manager with the land trust, said the restoration project would never have happened without the tribe’s help.

“If they wouldn’t have given up their plans, this project would not have started,” he said.

Blumenfeld, the regional EPA administrator, echoed that sentiment, saying in an interview prior to Sunday’s ceremony that the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria “stands out” among other tribes for its commitment to land conservation. Blumenfeld oversees federal environmental policy in California, Arizona, Hawaii, Nevada, the Pacific Islands and more than 140 tribal nations.

Blumenfeld called the Sears Point project the “poster child” for restoring wetlands in the Bay Area. He said the project establishes a benchmark by which other wetland projects will be measured and is also unique for being accessible to the public.

“A lot of these projects never get seen,” he said. “It’s hard to engage the public on the importance of restoring the bay if they don’t see or touch it.”

The project adds nearly 1,000 acres toward a goal first established by the scientific community in 1999 of restoring 100,000 acres of wetlands in the Bay Area. About 45,000 acres have been restored to date, according to Save the Bay.

Meisler, with the land trust, confessed Friday that he had major doubts whether the tidal restoration would ever be realized.

Perhaps the greatest hurdle was finding money for the project. The land trust raised \$20 million to acquire the property in 2005 and raised another \$18 million for the restoration work. Major donors included the state Wildlife Conservation Board (\$5 million), California Coastal Conservancy (\$3.2 million) and the Environmental Protection Agency (\$2.5 million).

There also have been many technical challenges with the project. To raise the farmland by about 7 feet, project managers are relying on the natural process of allowing tides to carry sediment into the area versus the standard — and more expensive — practice of trucking dirt in.

The natural approach has never been tried before on a project of this size. Crews added more than 500 small islands to support marsh plants, act as wind breaks and filter out sediment from the incoming tides.

Standing in the dry basin Friday, his boots caked in dirt, Meisler acknowledged not knowing what would happen once water began flowing in. Asked to describe what it would look like in 30 years at the spot where he stood, he replied, “at least six feet under water and covered with pickleweed.”