

Chapter 2.

Purpose of and Need for the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Plan

Introduction

CEQA requires an EIR to contain a statement of the objectives sought by the project proponents. Similarly, NEPA requires an EIS to briefly describe the underlying purpose of and need for the action and alternatives proposed by the lead agency. This chapter addresses these requirements.

Need for Tidal Habitat Restoration in San Francisco Bay

This project is being proposed to restore important tidal salt marsh habitat in San Francisco Bay. Approximately 90% of the original tidal wetlands of San Francisco Bay have been destroyed by being diked or filled for purposes such as agriculture, urban development, and salt production. This loss of tidal wetlands has greatly reduced the amount of habitat available to many species of fish and wildlife. Several local animal and plant species, including the salt marsh harvest mouse and the California clapper rail, have been listed as endangered as a direct result of the reduction in extent and quality of their wetland habitats. Many other species, including migratory shorebirds, waterfowl, and numerous fish species, also have been affected by this loss of habitats.

Project Purposes

As described in Chapter 1, the Coastal Conservancy was created by the state legislature for the express purpose of developing and sponsoring environmental projects to protect, preserve, and enhance the coastal resources along the 1,100-mile California coastline and around San Francisco Bay. The Coastal Conservancy's broad authority enables participation in a diverse array of projects involving habitat creation, enhancement, and restoration. The Coastal Conservancy is also the designated state agency for planning and coordinating federal surplus land sales in the coastal zone. Under this authority, the Coastal Conservancy has been developing the Hamilton wetland conceptual restoration plan in partnership with the BCDC, the state

agency with planning and regulatory authority in the San Francisco Bay area, and the Corps, the federal agency that would help secure funding for implementation if the project is authorized under the federal Water Resources Development Act.

The project has four broadly defined purposes:

- u Create up to 900 acres of habitat, with the potential to expand the project in a future phase to 2,500 acres.
- u Implement numerous federal, state, regional, and local plans (described below), including the Hamilton Base Reuse Plan, the Long-Term Management Strategy for Disposal of Dredge Sediments in San Francisco Bay, the San Francisco Bay Plan, the Regional Habitat Goals Project, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Estuary Project's Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan, and the City of Novato General Plan.
- u Establish a partnership between state and federal agencies (the Corps, the BCDC, and the Coastal Conservancy) to accommodate the habitat restoration objectives.
- u Enable completion of the U.S. Army's base closure and property disposal process (the Coastal Conservancy is working with USFWS to support and approve a no-cost transfer of HAAF to the Coastal Conservancy).

Project Goal and Objectives

In 1996, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) convened a group of federal and state agency representatives to explore the concept of restoring lands at HAAF to tidal wetlands. This group was expanded and evolved to form the Hamilton Restoration Group (HRG), an advisory body composed of representatives from the City of Novato (the City), state and federal agencies, landowners in the vicinity, environmental and local interest groups, and local citizens. The following specific project goal and objectives, which were derived through the HRG, have been adopted for the project:

Goal:

- u To create a diverse array of wetland and wildlife habitats at HAAF that benefits a number of endangered species as well as other migratory and resident species.

Objectives:

- u To design and engineer a restoration project that stresses simplicity and has little need for active management.
- u To demonstrate beneficial reuse of dredged material, if feasible.

- u To recognize existing site opportunities and constraints, including the runway and remediation of contaminated areas, as integral components of design.
- u To ensure no net loss of wetland habitat functions presently provided at the HAAF site.
- u To create and maintain wetland habitats that sustain viable wildlife populations, particularly for Bay Area special-status species.
- u To include buffer areas along the upland perimeter of the project area, particularly adjacent to residential areas, so that wildlife will not be impacted by adjacent land uses. Perimeter buffer areas should also function for upland refuge, foraging, and corridors for some species.
- u To be compatible with adjacent land uses and wildlife habitats.
- u To provide for public access that is compatible with protection of resource values and regional and local public access policies.

These goals and objectives were used by the Corps to establish the planning objectives indicated in the feasibility study. The planning objectives include restoring wetlands, ensuring beneficial reuse, facilitating base closure, and providing public access.

Relationship to Other Projects and Plans

The proposed project implements or ties in with many national, regional, and local planning efforts.

Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1988

The Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1988 (BRAC I, Public Law 100-526) required the closure and disposal of various military properties and facilities still in military ownership, including HAAF. During the BRAC process, disposal of the property could be accomplished through a Public Benefit Discount Conveyance, through which state or local entities may obtain property at less than fair market value when supported by a federal agency (in the case of HAAF, the USFWS) for uses that would benefit the public.

Currently, the U.S. Army anticipates transfer of the BRAC parcel to the Coastal Conservancy by the turn of the century. A condition of this transfer is remediation of contamination at the site. As a result, HAAF is undergoing investigation and remediation of contaminated areas. All sites known to be contaminated will be remediated by the U.S. Army to levels that meet federal, state, and local regulations and protect human health and the environment, and shall be certified to be clean by proper authorities before they are transferred, sold, or reused.

See Chapter 3 for additional information about the remediation process.

City of Novato General Plan

The City of Novato General Plan designates the project site for open space. The allowable uses within this land use category include uses devoted to, among other purposes, the preservation of natural resources and outdoor education. In addition, the general plan contains EN Program 10.3 as follows:

Encourage wetlands restoration where appropriate. Restoration of historic wetlands such as those at the Hamilton Field runway is contributing towards restoring those lands that experienced significant loss (over 80 percent) in the bay area.

Lastly, the general plan designates the project site as a “bayfront area”; bayfront areas are areas within Novato that require careful regulation because of their environmental values and the City’s desire to preserve and enhance natural resources and historical resources, including wildlife and aquatic habitats, tidal marshes, seasonal marshes, lagoons, wetlands, agricultural lands, and low-lying grasslands overlying historical marshes.

The San Francisco Bay Plan

In 1996, the BCDC amended the San Francisco Bay Plan as it relates to HAAF. The San Francisco Bay Plan designates wildlife priority use for HAAF through the development of a comprehensive wetland habitat plan and long-term management program to restore and enhance wetland habitat in diked former wetlands. The plan also indicates that dredged materials should be used whenever feasible and environmentally acceptable to facilitate wetland restoration.

San Francisco Estuary Baylands Ecosystem Goals Project

The San Francisco Estuary Baylands Ecosystem Goals Project (Goals Project) was established to determine the types and locations of wetlands needed in the estuary. The purpose of this project is to provide a biological basis to guide regional wetland planning for the preservation, enhancement, and restoration of the wetland communities. This process has identified a suite of key species of bayland plants and animal and their associated habitats that are required for their support. The proposed project is anticipated to provide key supporting habitat and species of plants and animals listed by the Goals Project. The proposed restoration plan would implement the specific habitat goals in the June 26, 1998 public review draft of the Goals Project proposed for the Hamilton site, which calls for restoration primarily to tidal marsh with an upland buffer and managed seasonal ponds.

San Francisco Estuary Project Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan

The San Francisco Estuary Project was established by Congress through the National Estuary Program. The San Francisco Estuary Project promotes consensus on how wetlands should be protected, regulated, and restored throughout the San Francisco Bay Estuary region. A Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) for the Bay and Delta, completed in 1993, provides a comprehensive implementation strategy describing various actions to protect the estuary of San Francisco Bay. The proposed project meets several of the objectives and recommended actions listed in the CCMP, including the reuse of dredged material for projects such as wetland creation and restoration, levee restoration, landfill cover, and upland building material where environmentally acceptable.

Long-Term Management Strategy for Disposal of Dredged Sediments in San Francisco Bay

For many years, dredged material taken from federal and port channels and berthing areas were removed from the bottom of San Francisco Bay, placed in barges, transported to one of the federally designated areas in the bay or ocean, and dumped. As a result of the controversy over the environmental impacts of this practice on the stressed bay estuary and limited capacity at the main in-bay disposal site near Alcatraz Island, new practices were adopted in the late 1980s by the agencies with authority over dredging and disposal, and disposal operations for large new work projects were substantially curtailed.

An interagency cooperative effort, the Long-Term Management Strategy for Disposal of Dredged Material in the San Francisco Bay Region (LTMS), was established in 1991 to resolve the disposal issues. The goals of the LTMS include conducting disposal of dredged material in the most environmentally sound manner and maximizing the use of dredged material as a resource. The LTMS agencies have agreed on a strategy of decreasing in-bay disposal over time with a goal of only 20% of bay-dredged material being disposed in the bay. The other 80% of the dredged material is proposed to be used as a resource or disposed of at the deep-ocean disposal site. This approach is intended to reduce the risk of adverse impacts from in-bay disposal while maximizing environmental benefits through reuse and providing greater certainty to dredging project sponsors.

Beneficial reuse sites for dredged material will be needed to achieve this goal. HAAF was evaluated as part of a comprehensive review by the LTMS agencies of potential sites for reuse and found to be a very suitable site for wetland restoration using dredged material.

Ecosystem Restoration Program Plan

A framework agreement was signed by various state and federal agencies under the interagency CALFED Bay-Delta Program (CALFED) to address the problems in the San Francisco Bay/Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta (Bay-Delta) region. The agreement provided a combination of state and federal funding for three specific purposes: Category I is for development of water quality standards, Category II is for water projects, and Category III is for implementation of habitat restoration. California voters approved Proposition 204, which provided state funding for the Category III program. Category III funding is earmarked for projects that benefit targeted species, particularly endangered fish and marsh species.

CALFED has produced a draft Ecosystem Restoration Program Plan that describes the important ecological processes, habitats, species, and stressors of the San Francisco Bay ecosystem. The plan includes “ecological zone visions” for each watershed area that address the potential for restoration in each zone. The proposed project was determined to be consistent with the visions and policies presented in the plan and received CALFED Category III funding.

Oakland Harbor Navigation Improvement (50-Foot) Project

The Port of Oakland proposes to deepen the federal channels of the Oakland Harbor and port-maintained berths to a depth of 50 feet mean lower low water to accommodate the newest generation of deep-draft container ships. The proposed project would involve the dredging and disposal of 12.0-14.5 million cubic yards of bottom sediments.

The final EIR/EIS for the Oakland Harbor Navigation Improvement (50-Foot) Project identifies the preferred alternative, which involves dredging to 50 feet with sediment reuse/disposal at various sites, including Hamilton.