

Salty tides pose threat to upper Elkhorn Slough

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Twice every day, thousands of gallons of saltwater pour through a set of damaged tidal gates into a portion of Elkhorn Slough where, once, only fresh water was found.

Landowners complain that the salty flood is ruining pasture land, destroying crops and natural vegetation — even flooding their back yards.

Environmentalists fear the continuing flood of saltwater into the upper reaches of Elkhorn Slough will destroy a delicate ecological balance that has been preserved since the construction of the Moss Landing Harbor nearly a half century ago.

But local efforts to get the tidal gates repaired now seem locked in

a bureaucratic dispute among several Monterey County departments and other interests.

The issue is not who will pay for the replacement of the gates, but who will pay the ongoing costs of cleaning and maintaining the gates once they are rebuilt.

The tidal gates are located under Elkhorn Road where it crosses the upper end of Elkhorn Slough. The gates are seven large corrugated steel pipes under the roadway, equipped with hinged covers on one end.

Those covers normally seal the pipes so that saltwater can't flow through the pipes during high tides into the upstream portions of the marsh that held fresh water until recently.

During the winter, fresh-water

runoff collects upstream of the tidal gates. The pressure created by a build up of the runoff opens the gates, allowing the fresh water to escape into the main portion of the slough.

Now, at least three of the seven pipes are allowing seawater to flow into the fresh water area daily. From the roadway, the saltwater flood appears to be a small river, and suction-caused whirlpools form over the intake ends of the pipes.

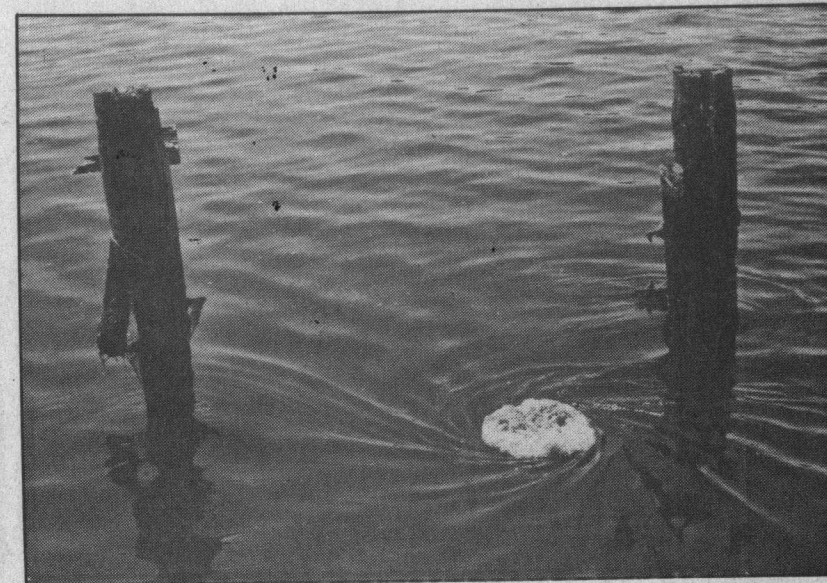
Monterey County officials have the funds to rebuild the tidal gates but work hasn't started, sources indicate, because there is no agreement on who will pay for maintaining and cleaning the gates once construction is approved.

Elkhorn resident Alex Solano took the dispute public this week when he asked the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency to look into the problem, since saltwater intrusion is ruining some land upstream from the tidal gates.

"Many of the homeowners and farmers have called the county department with this concern and nothing has yet been done to relieve the situation," Solano complained in a letter to the water

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Sea foam builds up around faulty drain that allows saltwater to breach tidal barriers.



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agency. "As of today, hundreds of acres are not available to be used and have thus far caused financial loss to many of the families in the area."

Thirty-three families signed a petition supporting Solano's plea.

The land where Elkhorn Road crosses the slough was owned until recently by the Blohm family. It was deeded to the Nature Conservancy, but Roberta Blohm Thomas said the original tide gates were installed when Moss Landing Harbor was first dredged.

The dredging changed the tidal flow in the slough and the gates were installed to protect the fresh water end of the slough. "It used to be all fresh water at this end and that was why they were put in," she recalled in a telephone conversation earlier this week.

Dredging the entrance to Moss Landing in 1946, said Mark Silberstein, director of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation, opened Elkhorn to the powerful effects of the tides.

"Before the harbor went in in 1946," Silberstein said, "the upper reaches were much fresher water

because the slough meandered out through an entrance that was only 4 feet deep. We dredged out the harbor and opened a 30-foot-deep channel and the tide water started reaching back much further.

"That was why they put the tide gates in under Elkhorn Road. The wetlands management plan is a compromise between what it used to be (which we can never recreate) and what is the best use of the existing land," Silberstein said.

"Having culverts and gates prevents it from being washed away," he added.

Monterey County planner Steven Maki is the project manager for the tide gate replacement.

The county has a \$256,000 grant from the state Coastal Conservancy to replace the tide gates and the pipes, which have been slowly sinking into the ooze of Elkhorn Slough.

"The residents are concerned about saltwater leaking in there in the summer. I'm concerned about the winter floods," said Maki.

Construction has been delayed for several reasons, Maki said this week. The first delay was caused by the necessity to complete some environmental and geological work required for a local environmental

assessment, and then for the Coastal Commission and Army Corps of Engineer permits needed for the project.

The environmental assessment is nearly complete, Maki said. "I'll be contacting the consultant this week for a final time line on his work," Maki said.

But it will take another six to nine months, he estimates, to get the necessary Coastal Commission and Corps of Engineers approval.

Maintenance is a major concern. There is no source of public funds now available to Monterey County government to pay for the ongoing maintenance.

Monterey County Public Works director Jerry Gromko said last week his department is willing to do the periodic maintenance, but it doesn't have the money to pay for the work.

"Public works has performed maintenance in the past," Gromko said, "but we have always billed the property owner for the costs."

"I would like to see an interim fix (to the flooding) if we can get together and see what it would cost to replace the gates. If it is only a few thousand dollars, then we should go ahead with it," Silberstein said.