

# Marsh project gets \$1M grant

Wetlands

## Habitat restoration to benefit fisheries, sea otters and water quality

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**ELKHORN SLOUGH** » U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is giving a push to a project to restore critical tidal marsh in Elkhorn Slough with a \$1 million grant. \*

The 66-acre endeavor, the first

phase of a 135-acre project, is expected to benefit Monterey Bay fisheries, improve water quality, provide habitat for the threatened southern sea otter, and serve as a model for the future restoration of hundreds more acres of drowned marshland at the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve.

"It's wonderful to have an op-

portunity to reverse this habitat loss," said project manager Monique Fountain.

In California, 90 percent of tidal marshes have been lost in the past 150 years. At Elkhorn Slough, 50 percent of the habitat, about 1,000 acres, disappeared as the land was diked, drained and

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Tidal Wetland Project Director Monique Fountain and Elkhorn Slough Reserve Manager David Feliz walk over reclaimed slough land that was built up with dirt in 2013.

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## Slough

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turned into pasture or fields for crops.

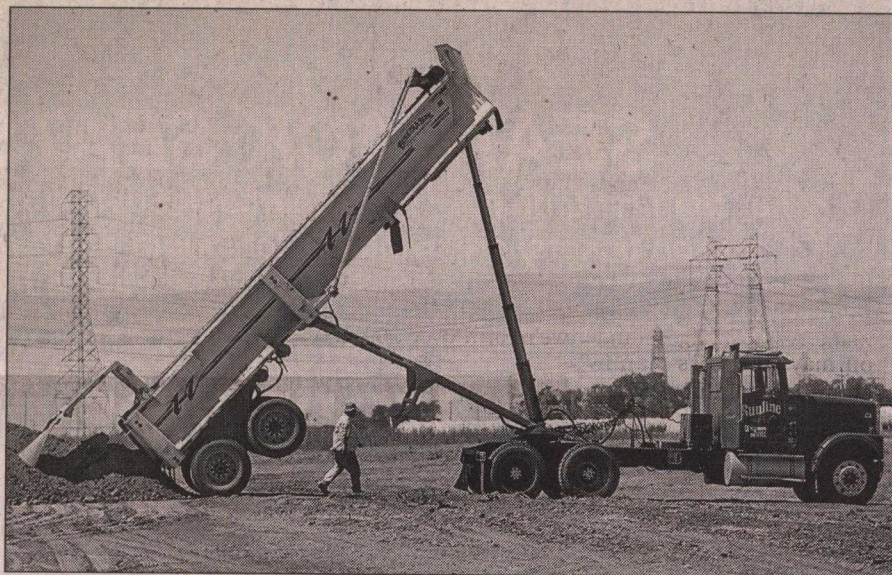
Eventually, the land subsided, dikes failed and water flowed back in. But the ground is now too low to support healthy marsh, too high for the mud flats that support clams and crabs.

Even with the losses, Elkhorn Slough is home to the largest salt marsh on the West Coast south of the San Francisco Bay. The project, near Moonglow Dairy, is expected to increase the habitat by 8 to 10 percent.

Work to build up 61 acres with thousands of cubic yards of dirt, some trucked in from a levee excavation project in Watsonville in 2013, is expected to start by the end of 2015. Marsh plants will gain a foothold within the first year, Fountain said. The area will begin to be able to support the small creatures that provide the nutritional foundation for Monterey Bay fisheries and a breeding ground for fish. Female otters, who are rearing their young on a nearby island, may be able to expand their numbers.

"We anticipate a functional marsh within five years," Fountain said.

An additional 5 acres of higher ground will be planted with native grasses, and will produce seeds for future restoration at the reserve.



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Dirt excavated from the Pajaro River is dumped along Elkhorn Slough tidal lands in 2013 as part of a project to restore wetlands. The Tidal Wetland Project received a \$1 million grant from U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

Fountain ticked off another 600 acres that could be restored to marsh farther inland if resources become available.

The project was designed during the past year. Fountain said it's not just a matter of pushing dirt into the water. Details like slope and elevation to provide a hedge against anticipated climate change-driven sea level rise had to be worked out.

The next step is to obtain permits from 15 separate state and federal agencies. Fountain doesn't expect much of a problem there due to a unique collaborative design process.

"We brought together those agencies," she said.

### RESTORATION PROJECT

**What:** Restoration of 135 acres of tidal marshland and native grassland.

**Where:** Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve.

**Why:** Improve wildlife habitat and water quality, and buffer anticipated sea level rise.

**When:** Phase 1 construction involving 66 acres to start in 2015.

**Cost:** \$6 million.

**Details:** elkhornslough.org

"They helped shape the project."

Funding to complete the restoration is still in the

works. The Coastal Conservancy and state Department of Water Resources have provided grants, but, even with the new money, the \$6 million needed to complete the entire 135-acre project is still short about \$2.5 million. Backers are waiting to hear about several more outstanding grants, and Fountain is hopeful the funding will arrive.

The federal money helped. The project is one of 25 across the nation to receive funding through the competitive National Coastal Wetlands Grant Program.

"It's good news," said Dave Feliz, reserve manager. "It moves the project forward."