

# Problems at Elkhorn Slough evident long ago

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To people familiar with Elkhorn Slough, the erosion problem has been evident for some time.

"My grandfather was for the harbor, for cutting the beach," said David Vierra, whose family has lived on the land around Elkhorn Slough for generations. "It took about two months for him to realize he was wrong ... it just flushed the slough."

Residents of the area saw the results immediately. The tidal action widened and deepened channels. Over time, it undercut the banks and caused levees to fail, accelerating the erosion.

The Vierra family built two levees to protect their land, but both eventually failed. Vierra said about 10 acres of the 60 acres his family owns is now under salt water permanently, and "more than that (is covered) on a high tide." A piece of land 40 feet deep and a ¼ mile long has simply washed away, Vierra said. In 1990, the family well became so filled with salt water "you couldn't even make soap bubbles." They shut the well and went onto city water.

"We're losing land and it's getting worse," he said. "It never should have happened."

He can document the changes because of photographic and

other records kept by his family, he said.

Vierra said a neighbor's lands are also flooded, and that he has seen cattle trying to drink the salt water now in their pastures. Old cypress and eucalyptus trees along what are now the edges of the slough along his property are sick from the salt water.

"It's really sad to see," he said.

Mark Silberstein, director of the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, said he, researchers from Moss Landing Marine Laboratories and other scientists, had been noticing and documenting the

erosion for some time.

"There's been a dramatic loss of salt marsh," he said.

Silberstein said that sea grasses, which used to grow in abundance in the slough, are fewer. Like Vierra, he said trees that are now growing closer to the salt water than they once were, are dying. Areas that used to support pickleweed have turned into mud flats.

Loss of wildlife is harder to document because the slough system has undergone so many changes, even before the opening of the harbor channel, and because good "baseline" studies don't exist, Silberstein said. And while some wildlife is bound to be lost as the habitat changes,

other creatures, like harbor seals, are moving in.

Silberstein is frustrated by the situation. After all the time and money that has been spent preserving the slough, it's washing away in front of his eyes.

"Everyday when I drive in, I see more of the slough disappearing," he said. "It's sort of alarming."

But putting in a barrier now could have repercussions on wildlife that has grown used to using both the slough and the bay, he said.

"This is what happens when we start tinkering with the system. It's a lot like flypaper. Thinking about it just makes my

head spin: What's the responsible thing to do?" he said.

"We're probably going to have to do something about it. If you do nothing, what is it going to look like?"

The reason there's so much agony over the prospect of losing the slough is that it is one of the few habitats of its kind left in California. It's a lesson, he said, that's timely for Watsonville, which is struggling with the need to grow and the desire to protect its wetlands. If you preserve just a little, you're in trouble when a problem arises, he said.

"Let's not do this again," he said.