

ELKHORN SLOUGH

Double Duty

Pajaro River flood protection project benefits Elkhorn Slough



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Tidal Wetland Project Director Monique Fountain and Reserve Manager Dave Feliz walk over reclaimed slough land built up with dirt trucked in from the Pajaro River on Thursday.

Excavated dirt to be used to restore rare salt marsh

By DONNA JONES

djones@santacruzsentinel.com

8/23/13

MOSS LANDING — One after another in a constant parade Thursday, the trucks dumped their loads at the edge of Elkhorn Slough.

They've been shuttling dirt dug from the benches of the Pajaro River levee down Highway 1 to the site near Moonglow Dairy for two weeks at a rate of about 175 loads a day. By the time they're done in a day or two, they'll have deposited more than 60,000 cubic yards of dirt, enough to cover 13 acres to a depth of four feet.

The side benefit of the Santa Cruz County Public Works excavation project aimed at improving flood protection for Watsonville and surrounding agricultural lands will be restoration of critical wetlands at Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve.

"This is a truly innovative and collaborative project that will restore rare salt marsh habitat at the reserve that has been lost for decades," said Dave Feliz, California Department of Fish and Wildlife reserve manager.

Monique Fountain, Tidal Wetlands Program director, said 90 percent of California's wetlands have disappeared, largely because of the construction of dikes and the draining of marshes. That's what happened at Elkhorn, where half the marshes — about 1,000 acres — were drained for use as pasture and farmland in the late 1800s.

In the years that followed, the drained ground began to subside, and poorly maintained dikes failed. What was once marsh is now under water.

The dirt, now being stockpiled at the edge of the slough, will change that. When all permits are in place, possibly by next year, the dirt will be pushed into the

SEE PROJECT ON C4



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Dirt excavated from the Pajaro River is being trucked to Elkhorn Slough to reclaim portions of the wetland previously used for agriculture.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Dirt excavated from the Pajaro River is being trucked to Elkhorn Slough where it is being used to build up land for wetland restoration.

PROJECT

Continued from C1

water, raising the ground four feet to restore 18 acres of marsh. It's the first phase of a \$6 million project to restore 100 acres of wetlands and 40 acres of uplands bluff at the reserve.

Without the dirt, it wouldn't be possible, Fountain said. And more will be needed,

about 200,000 cubic yards for the first phase alone.

"The land's too low to support healthy marsh, and too high to support healthy mud flats," home to the clams and crabs that provide food for marine mammals, she said. As a result, "it's not playing its part."

Mark Silberstein, executive director of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation, peered through binoculars at a healthier section of marsh

across the water. Egrets and a heron stood among pickleweed. Harbor seals rested along the mud flats.

He's clearly excited about expanding the habitat.

"It's our first effort to bring back the historic marshes of Elkhorn Slough using this technique," Silberstein said. "It's a beneficial use of this sediment."

Follow Sentinel reporter Donna Jones at [Twitter.com/DonnaJonescs](https://twitter.com/DonnaJonescs)