

**Calabazas/San Tomas Aquino Creek-Marsh Connection Project
Stakeholder Meeting
Draft Meeting Notes**

DATE/TIME: Tuesday, October 24, 2023; 5:30 PM - 7:00 PM

MEETING LOCATION: South Bay Yacht Club (1491 Hope Street, Alviso, CA 95002)

ZOOM: <https://kearnswest.zoom.us/j/89626777534?pwd=zeabnZfvm7lv6VJNzctAXepuJ7cmCT.1>

MEETING ID: 896 2677 7534 (Passcode: 210447)

CALL IN (audio only): (669) 444-9171 (Conference ID: 210447#)

MEETING NOTES:

Opening Remarks

The Calabazas/San Tomas Aquino Creek-Marsh Connection Project (Project) Stakeholder Meeting commenced with Kelsey Rugani, Kearns & West, facilitating and welcoming participants to the meeting. Kelsey shared that the purpose of the meeting was to provide an update on the progress of the Project and to have a discussion focused on trails and public access.

Lisa Bankosh, Santa Clara Valley Water District (Valley Water), shared opening remarks. Lisa outlined the Project's four objectives, noting that the primary focus is on ecological restoration. Of note is the goal to enhance public access, the central theme for today's meeting. Lisa presented the trails and public access opportunities that the Project is exploring and thanked the City of San Jose and other Project Partners for their close coordination and participation. Lisa reminded participants of Valley Water's role in providing resources for public access trails wherein they rely on the municipal partners (City of San Jose here) for post-construction operations, patrols, and trail maintenance.

Kelsey reviewed the meeting agenda, setting a clear schedule for what topics will be discussed, when Q&A would take place and that the meeting would conclude by 7:00 PM. Kelsey reiterated that the meeting's goal is to share Project information and gather input on trails, recreation, and public access. Ground rules were outlined, and it was mentioned that sticky notes for input were available on poster boards for in-person attendees.

Project Overview

Noah Hume, Stillwater Sciences, presented an overview of the Project objectives, conceptual alternative development process, and the planning timeline. Noah mentioned the visioning effort in 2018 and securing over \$3 million in Measure AA grant funding from the San Francisco Restoration Authority. The Project, initiated a year ago in the South Bay salt ponds, has the primary goal of restoring tidal habitat connectivity and various marsh and riverine habitats and four key objectives. The Project timeline involves the development of over 20 conceptual alternatives, narrowed down to five; currently the project is initiating the feasibility analysis and there will future agency and public meetings to present the ranked feasible alternatives, which will include the recreational changes under discussion. Noah mentioned the next public meeting will focus on the feasible alternative and will take place in Winter or Spring 2024.

Conceptual maps/diagrams of the Project's conceptual alternatives were presented, showing locations of restoration elements like berm breaches, island habitat features, and active creek re-alignment vs passive (breach only) restoration approaches in Harvey Marsh. Other Projects in the area were

mentioned, such as the Pond A4 Resilient Habitat Restoration Project, and the larger South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, which serves as a Project partner and close collaborator with Valley Water.

Q&A:

Kelsey welcomed discussion and questions related to the Project overview. Attendees were encouraged to seek clarification on Project objectives, conceptual alternatives development process, the timeline, and the future direction of the Project.

The following summarizes the questions asked from attendees both in the meeting room and in the virtual Zoom audience.

- **Roy Hays, South Bay Yacht Club** - *I notice there's a number of new gaps on the Alviso slough side of the pond and there's no new gaps on the Guadalupe slough side. Was there a reason for that?*
 - Stillwater Sciences shared the alternatives considered for the Project, focusing on the placement of berm breaches. The project explored various options for the restoration elements, including examining impacts of breaches on only Guadalupe slough, only Alviso slough or breaches on both sloughs. Preliminary modeling revealed that though the SF Bay was providing the most sediments through the breaches at the existing WCS, the Alviso slough breaches were more successful at delivering sediments to the ponds than breaches on the Guadalupe slough side of the A8 Ponds.
- **Eileen McLaughlin, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge** - *Will today's presentation be made available?*
 - Kearns & West stated the presentation will be available after the meeting and invited participants to reach out to the Project Team with any questions that may come up after today.
- **Melisa Amato, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and San Pablo Bay National Refuge** - *It looks like the Project is proposing to make Ponds A5, 7, and 8 fully tidal. Is that correct? Are there going to be any water control structures associated with those breaches?*
 - Stillwater Sciences discussed the existing water control structures at Ponds A4, A7. As well as the large A8 notch WCS south of the SBYC near the America Center. They explained that the current condition of the ponds is referred to as muted tidal, with a tidal range of approximately 2 feet. However, depending on the number and location of breaches implemented, there is a likelihood that the tidal range will expand. Further modeling work is ongoing to better understand these dynamics.
 - The tidal effect in the ponds is anticipated to be less than the tidal range observed in the sloughs, which is around 4 feet or more.
 - Melisa highlighted the current use of ponds A5, A7, A8, and A8 South for waterfowl hunting on the refuge. The levees surrounding these ponds are exclusively accessible to hunters. She stressed the need for the Project to consider this usage, especially if the Bay Trail is expanded. They also requested clear signage to inform both waterfowl hunters and trail users about ongoing activities in the area, emphasizing the importance of balancing different activities within the Project vicinity.
- **Eileen McLaughlin, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge** - *Are the breaches going to be controlled by gates?*
 - Stillwater Sciences clarified that the planned breaches will be open and not gated or maintained; the USFWS currently lacks funding to maintain the existing berms or the planned breaches. The existing aging water control structures at Ponds A5 and A8 in the northern area of the A8 Ponds, are near the end of their operational life. If/when these

structures fail, the ponds will naturally convert to tidal habitats. The Project offers a controlled approach to manage this transition, as opposed to unintentional, natural breaching of the berms where timing, location and breach size is uncertain.

Trails and Public Access Overview and Concepts

Context Setting and Background

Kelsey initiated discussion of trails and public access within the Project area by providing an overview of the existing recreation and access in the area, noting the San Francisco Bay Trail system which provides opportunities for biking, hiking and walking. When completed, the Bay Trail will be a 500-mile transportation and recreation route connecting Napa and Sonoma Counties to Santa Clara County. The Bay Trail segments within the Project vicinity are natural surfaced while connecting trails are paved. Additionally, an existing social trail encircles the berm around Harvey Marsh, and a waterfowl hunting boat launch and check station are located in the southwest section of the A8 ponds.

Kelsey outlined some of the opportunities and challenges the Project Team is considering. The Project is excited to partner in the opportunity to add a one-mile trail segment (Reach 9) connecting Sunnyvale and Alviso. This segment would bridge a portion of the existing gap in the Bay Trail, bringing the Trail closer to the Bay and improving connectivity to and from the Alviso neighborhood. The Project will also be able to bring visitor amenities to the Bay Trail such as benches and interpretive signage which will improve wildlife and open water viewing opportunities.

The Project is currently evaluating how to balance multiple Project objectives, including balancing habitat restoration with public access, including maintaining A8 ramp access post-project and establishing buffers between trails and habitats. Continuous use of the Bay trail during construction is a vital considerations. Future maintenance costs will also be considered in project planning.

Kelsey mentioned that the Project Team has met with Project Partners and Local Agencies regularly over the last year to share updates and collect input. The Project Team also began hearing some initial community interests and is looking forward to learning more tonight and in the future.

Trail Concepts

Melissa Lane, Stillwater Sciences, provided an overview of public access enhancements and began by discussing potential changes in pond access. Melissa noted the presence of an existing waterfowl hunters' boat launch area in the southwest corner of the ponds, which would become isolated by proposed breaches from Harvey Marsh into the A8 Ponds. The relocation of the boat ramp is under consideration, with one idea being to move it to the southeast corner, though the exact location will be determined in consultation with the landowner, USFWS.

Melissa then introduced two trail concepts. Trail Concept 1 involves a one-mile trail segment called Reach 9, which has already been planned and approved by the City of San Jose as a paved bikeway. This leverages existing plans and provides support for future funding. Liz Sewell from the City of San Jose shared additional background on the Reach 9 planning process.

Trail Concept 2 is similar to Trail Concept 1, and also includes a viewing platform for the public to observe the A8 ponds, Harvey Marsh, and the flow through the berm breach. Notably, the pond breaches associated with the Project's restoration alternatives do not impact either trail option. Both concepts address various opportunities and challenges related to enhancing public access, such as reducing the Bay Trail gap, relocating it closer to San Francisco Bay, and improving wildlife viewing while ensuring continuous Bay Trail use during construction and providing buffer zones for the newly restored

habitat. Feedback from the recent environmental community meeting has been crucial in shaping these concepts.

Q&A and Discussion

The following summarizes the questions asked from attendees both in the meeting room and in the virtual Zoom audience.

- **Mark Yoder, Citizen** - *I'm curious about the access for canoe and kayaks into the ponds.*
 - Stillwater Sciences explained that the ponds are currently off-limits to canoes and kayaks, a restriction that will continue due to hunting activities.
 - South Bay Yacht Club commented on the possibility of kayak and canoe access, which they had previously discussed with Valley Water regarding the old Blue Whale Sailing School property. While there was initial interest in the idea, the challenge revolved around determining who would manage it. South Bay Yacht Club mentioned their interest in revisiting this concept if circumstances permit. The property once had a launch dock and a small ramp for canoes due to its prior use by the Blue Whale Sailing School. Therefore, it's a feasible option for such access.
- **Eileen McLaughlin, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge** Concerns about trail's impact on wildlife habitats in the refuge were expressed, emphasizing the Refuge Improvement Act's priority for wildlife benefits and compatibility determinations. Discrepancies in trail plans and interactions with the refuge were highlighted.
 - Stillwater Sciences clarified that the trail is located on private property, and the City is working to obtain an easement from America Center. The Project involves partnering with USFWS and ongoing discussions will focus on addressing property boundary complexities.
 - A member of the public, initially concerned, expressed skepticism about property ownership.
 - The response mentioned the ongoing boundary survey needs to determine property ownership and emphasized coordination with stakeholders, including USFWS. The City of San Jose shared historical context about past trail planning and expressed their intention to contact USFWS for further discussions.
 - San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge shared important context and concerns, emphasizing that some of the proposed breaches could remove foot access for hunters, which would affect approximately 1,300 acres of hunting areas. Furthermore, the proposed location for a boat ramp coincides with the intended site for a new Bay trail. San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge pointed out the potential for conflict if the public encounters a boat ramp since the refuge currently lacks a compatibility determination for public boating in these ponds. These comments highlight the need to address the potential impact on hunting access and public use while respecting the established compatibility determinations for the area.
 - Valley Water addressed San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge concerns about pond access, explaining that the berms around the A8 Ponds are not engineered levees. Over time, these berms are deteriorating, which could affect access for hunters whether the restoration Project is conducted or not. The goal of the Project is to restore the ponds while also increasing public access and maximizing the length of foot accessible berms was part of meeting that objective. It was emphasized that there are no plans by USFWS to maintain the A8 Ponds berms over the long-term.

- **Betsy Megas, City of Santa Clara Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC)** - *What impacts, if any, are anticipated towards creeks in the Project area?*
 - Stillwater Sciences clarified that the Project aims to connect existing trails, which would enhance the trail system without causing adverse effects on the current trails. The Project's boundary includes some tributary creeks and areas.
- **Eileen McLaughlin, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge** - *I hope that the City of San Jose will consider the ecological restoration aspect, emphasizing that such efforts take time, including land-building, vegetation growth, and the return of endangered species like the Ridgway's rail. I caution against rushing trail construction, because of the potential negative impact on wildlife habitats. We need to balance the desire for trails with the necessary time for habitat development and planning trail development carefully to create vibrant wildlife habitats while addressing potential challenges and timeframes involved.*
 - Stillwater Sciences mentioned the disturbed grasslands on the America Center (former landfill) and the need to protect the landfill cap integrity will mean that no restoration actions will be conducted in this area. They expressed the challenge of balancing restoration goals with the desire to create a trail for public use. They acknowledged the current unofficial use of the area by people and the potential changes in public uses if breaches are chosen in specific locations.
- Additionally, meeting participants expressed concerns about the appeal and functionality of the proposed Reach 9 trail segment, stating that it lacks commuter appeal, offers an indirect route, and doesn't effectively connect residential and commercial centers. Some suggested that the trail might primarily serve occasional recreational use and be better suited for wildlife viewing.
- Lastly, concerns were raised about the proposed new boat launch location, emphasizing the potential danger due to the strong water flow near the weir, particularly during the winter. Even a minor mistake by a boater could lead to a dangerous situation with the A8 notch. Stillwater emphasized that ramp relocation will be coordinated with USFWS staff.

Next Steps

Kelsey reviewed the following next steps:

- The next public meeting focused on the feasible alternative will be scheduled for some time in Winter 2024.
- The meeting presentation and recording will be made available to invitees and participants via email.
- Meeting participants are encouraged to reach out to the Project Team with any questions:
 - Judy Nam, Valley Water: JNam@valleywater.org
 - Noah Hume, Stillwater Sciences: noah@stillwatersci.com
 - Melissa Lane, Stillwater Sciences: mlane@stillwatersci.com
 - Kelsey Rugani, Kearns & West: krugani@kearnswest.com

Conclusion & Closing Remarks:

Kelsey Rugani expressed gratitude to the presenters and all the stakeholders for their participation in the meeting. Kelsey encouraged meeting participants to contact the Project Team if they had any further questions and formally closed the meeting.