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Elkhorn Slough Foundation adds to land holdings

Sentinel staff report

Some 390 acres in Moss Landing will be restored to wetlands after a purchase the Elkhorn Slough Foundation announced Wednesday.

The foundation said it acquired 183 acres from Sea Mist Farms in Moro Cojo Slough. That land will be restored, along with a 207-acre chunk of property adjacent to it, once proposed for an oil refinery, where restorations efforts have been ongoing for the past five years, foundation officials said.

"We're already seeing birds coming back," said Mark Silberstein, foundation director.

Moro Cojo Slough runs south of Elkhorn Slough from Moss Landing to Castroville.

Until the 1930s the area was a natural wetland. Since then it was diked, drained and cultivated, but remained too wet to be productive farmland, Silberstein said.

In the 1970s the area was slated for industrial development.

Silberstein said that by restoring the land to its natural wetland state, the foundation will also be helping trap fresh water, reducing groundwater depletion in the area.

The 183 acres cost \$887,000, plus \$26,000 in transaction costs, and \$30,000 for restoration planning. The Elkhorn Slough Foundation obtained funding for the project from the Regional Water Quality Control Board (\$590,000); the California Coastal Conservancy, which committed grant funds from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (\$273,000); and the Packard Foundation (\$80,000). The Regional Water Quality Control Board funding comes from a \$7 million mitigation fund established when the Moss Landing power plant was expanded in 2001.

One reason the foundation was able to buy the new property is the working relationship built over the past five years with its farm neighbors.

"We've worked with them," said Hugo Tottino, director of Sun Mist Farms. "They understand our needs. They're practical people."

The foundation's restoration work on the adjoining land has incorporated features to reduce farm pests.

Restoration of the property will be carried out by the foundation in partnership with Moss Landing Marine Laboratories, Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve and the Watershed Institute at Cal State Monterey Bay.

A committee of scientists, farmers and landowners is being formed to advise the foundation on the restoration and management of the property.

The Moro Cojo Slough purchase is the latest acquisition in the foundation's drive to double the amount of land it protects. This plan was announced in June 2001 when the foundation protected 2,000 acres. Since then the Foundation has acquired 1,300 acres, bringing the amount of land under its care to more than 3,400 acres.

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