

Estuary cleanup in progress

San Jose Mercury News

Posted:

InsideBayArea.com

ALAMEDA -- More than 40 abandoned and sunken vessels are in the Oakland-Alameda Estuary, leaking contaminants and posing a hazard to sailors, rowers and others who drift past. But that will soon change under a multimillion-dollar project to raise the wrecks, including two tugboats completely submerged near the Park Street Bridge.

The cleanup, which began in September and should be wrapped up by Thanksgiving, is a combined effort of local, state and federal agencies.

Along with sunken boats and the various debris that juts above the water, the project is targeting people who live aboard their vessels and are illegally moored in the estuary.

So far, crews have raised four boats and cleaned up four sites, said Todd Thalhamer, a project engineer with the state Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, or CalRecycle, one of the agencies behind the effort.

"It's an underwater dump site," Thalhamer said on Oct. 17, when he joined others helping with the cleanup on a tour of some of the locations, including at Union Point Park along Oakland's Embarcadero.

What can make the work difficult, Thalhamer said, is that some wrecks identified on sonar later disappeared after silt swept over them with the tide from San Francisco Bay.

Among the completely submerged vessels is the *Respect*, a 700-ton tugboat that sank in April 2007 near The Dutra Group engineering yard on Clement Avenue. Built in 1945, the *Respect* served the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway before it ended up in private hands and docked in the estuary. The day before it sank, vandals boarded the tug and pillaged it for scrap metal.

The *Captain Al*, a 110-foot tugboat, is submerged at the same spot, as well as two barges. The laborious work to raise a vessel often involves pumping water and removing silt lodged deep within the hull, said Rich Martyn, an on-site coordinator with the Environmental Protection Agency. Crews hope to raise the *Respect* and the three vessels nearby around the end of the month, Thalhamer said.

When a boat is lifted from the water and brought ashore, contaminants such as fuel, oil and asbestos are removed. It's then broken apart and any salvageable metal is recycled. What's left ends up in a landfill.

No unusual items have turned up inside any of the wrecks. But during a recent cleanup in the Sacramento Delta crews raised a vessel that contained radioactive aircraft instruments, Thalhamer said.

"Every time we tackle one of these, it's an eye-opener," he said.

Other wrecks set to be removed include a catamaran, a tug and two barges partially above the water in San Leandro Bay. Pelicans and cormorants currently roost on the tug's wheelhouse.

"Those boats are next on the hit list," Thalhamer said.

The EPA has committed \$3 million for the cleanup, and CalRecycle is putting up \$1.3 million. A \$650,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation is also helping pay for the project, plus Bay Ship & Yacht has provided \$75,000 as part of a mitigation fund for its new dry dock.

The staging area for the work is the vacant lot at Oak and Clement streets, where owner Francis Collins hopes to eventually build housing. Collins is allowing the crews free use of his property.

The effort to launch the cleanup began last year when Oakland police Sgt. Jim Gordon, who is part of the department's marine patrol unit, contacted state officials after discovering dozens of syringes near Jack London Square.

"I realized that something had got to be done," Gordon said. "It was a hazard to the community."

Contact Peter Hegarty at 510-748-1654. Follow him at [Twitter.com/Peter_Hegarty](https://twitter.com/Peter_Hegarty).

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What's the State of the San Francisco Estuary?

Sharol Nelson-Embry, KQED Community Contributor | October 25, 2013 | 0 Comments

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The estuary provides the backdrop for daily life in the greater Bay Area. It shapes and influences everything from our commute – including bridges, ferries and tunnels – to our very weather. It also supports a vast array of non-human inhabitants: migratory birds that can outnumber the human



Harbor seal pup development could be impacted by chemicals entering the bay, according to a new study to be released next week. Photo by Mike Baird, Wikimedia

population every winter, as well as marine mammals, fish, and invertebrates. This month celebrates the 20th anniversary of a partnership of agencies that developed the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) for San Francisco Bay, dedicated to monitoring and improving the health of our estuary. The partnership is hosting the 11th biennial [State of the Estuary Conference \(SOE\)](#) on October 29 and 30 in Oakland.

Research has helped shed light on the bay's complex ecosystems and threats posed by pollution, development and diminished habitats. Our estuary is radically altered from its condition 150 years ago: over 85% of historical wetlands lost to development, mercury and other contaminants remain as relics in the sediment, and the swell of human inhabitants brings other impacts such as increased atmospheric carbon and imported invasive species. At this month's SOE conference, scientists, researchers and land managers currently working on projects in the Bay will make over 50 presentations. At the previous gathering in 2011, a *State of the Bay* report was released which indicated the mixed health of the bay. A different report, *The Bay Pulse*, will be released this year on the second day of the conference and will highlight two major new trends.

I spoke with Jay Davis from the [San Francisco Estuary Institute](#) and one of the co-organizers of the SOE. "One of the trends the report examines," he said, "is the rise of 'contaminants of concern' in the bay including flame retardants, stain repellents and pesticides. These contaminants enter the bay from a variety of sources that are difficult to control. Treated sewage releases, urban stormwater runoff, agricultural runoff and the atmosphere are all pathways for chemicals to enter the bay."

Jay added, "The levels of these chemicals need to be monitored as they can affect the reproduction and development of apex predators like harbor seals, cormorants and sharks as the chemicals accumulate up the food chain."

The second trend is an increase in the amount of algae growth in our formerly resilient estuary. Jay explained, "Historically, higher turbidity decreased algae blooms in the estuary. In 1999, the bay reached a tipping point, becoming less turbid." Jim Cloern of the US Geological Survey hypothesizes that changes in the clam population in the southern part of the bay, along with changes in fish abundance eating the clams linked with climate oscillations (including El Nino), played into making the bay clearer and ripe for increased, unwanted algae growth.

You can attend the [State of the Estuary conference](#) or [follow it on Twitter](#) to learn more about current Bay-Delta research and restoration projects. The East Bay Regional Park District is especially honored to be receiving two Outstanding Environmental Awards for interpretive programs at Tidewater Boating Center in Oakland and the Big Break Visitor Center at the Delta in Oakley.

Explore: [east bay regional parks district](#), [San Francisco Bay](#), [State of the Estuary](#)

Category: [Environment](#)

Component of Bay Health	Issue	Trend	Notes
Water Quality			
Bay for oysters (BFO)	Low	Improving	Bay water quality is better than 40 years ago, but the loss of approximately 85% of historical oyster reefs, combined with other factors, has led to a decline in oyster populations. Oyster reefs are important for water quality, providing natural filtration and habitat for other species.
Microplastics	Low	No change	Microplastics are found in the bay, but their concentrations are low. They are a concern because they can be ingested by marine life and can break down into smaller particles.
Salts for swimming	Good	No change	Salts in the bay are safe for swimming. However, there is a concern about the potential for increased salinity due to sea level rise.
Microplastic in oysters	High	No change	Microplastics are found in oysters, but their concentrations are low. They are a concern because they can be ingested by marine life and can break down into smaller particles.
Wetlands			
Wetlands in the bay	Low to good	Improving	Wetlands in the bay are improving, but there is still a need for more wetlands. Wetlands are important for water quality, providing natural filtration and habitat for other species.
Wetlands in the delta	Low	Improving	Wetlands in the delta are improving, but there is still a need for more wetlands. Wetlands are important for water quality, providing natural filtration and habitat for other species.
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This report card from the 2011 State of the Estuary document shows the complexity of monitoring the Bay.



Students in Oakland get an opportunity to explore their waterways and Bay connections in programs at East Bay Regional Park District's Tidewater Boating Center. Photo courtesy of EBRPD.

Otter signals Lake Merritt ecosystem's comeback

Will Kane

Updated 7:31 am, Sunday, October 27, 2013

Greg Lewis had just finished his evening row on Oakland's Lake Merritt when he saw a slick, squirmy, furry bundle hoist itself out of the water and onto the edge of the dock.

It was a river otter, the first one spotted in Lake Merritt in decades.

"I saw his head pop up and saw him pull himself on the dock," Lewis, 53, of Berkeley, said of the surprise Oct. 6 encounter. "He looked at us, we looked at him for a bit."

Lewis, who develops air pollution monitors, snapped a few shots, and like that, the animal plopped back into the water and paddled off.

No one has reported seeing the otter since, and biologists ordered Lewis to keep his mouth shut until they were sure the popular, photogenic animal wasn't going to make the lake a home.

But the sighting alone is proof, experts said, that Lake Merritt is making a comeback.

"It is one indication that the lake is getting healthier," said Richard Bailey, executive director of the Lake Merritt Institute, a nonprofit that monitors the lake. "Another indication, just this week, was that we spotted an osprey on an island in the lake. We haven't seen one of those here in a decade."

Bacteria in the lake are at some of their lowest levels in years, and there's half as much trash floating in the lake as there was in 2005, Bailey said.

Revitalizing lake

Oakland is trying hard to revitalize the lake. Oakland voters passed a \$198 million bond in 2002 to spiff up the lake, and in February, the city inaugurated a new channel that will eventually restore the natural order by reconnecting the lake to the bay.

Before Oakland was developed, Lake Merritt was a brackish lagoon that would swell and shrink with the tide and was home to otters, sea lions and an extraordinary array of migrating birds.

As Oakland grew from a town to a city, it choked the lake's connection to the bay and started pouring sewage into the lake. The water stagnated, and wildlife fled.

But the appearance of a river otter might be a sign that that's all changing.

The otter was probably searching the Oakland Estuary for a new fishing hole when it swam up a culvert, squeezed between metal bars designed to keep trash from flowing into the bay and started exploring the 155-acre lake.

"It is exciting, but not particularly surprising," said Megan Isadore, the co-founder of the River Otter Ecology Project, a Marin County group that tracks river otter sightings across the Bay Area. "River otters are making a recovery in the Bay Area. They were gone from the Bay Area for a long time."

The North American river otter once lived in almost every creek and lake in Northern California. The fissipeds - animals with padded feet - are members of the weasel family. They can live in salt water, brackish water or fresh water and are agile on their feet, sometimes even climbing trees.

Threats to survival

Russian and other European hunters killed thousands of river and sea otters, all so the ladies of the Victorian age could wear their thick, water-repellent fur coats. Habitat loss from construction of dams and canals also depleted the river otter ranks. Pollution, including mercury from gold mining, reduced the population further.

But increasingly, otters are being spotted across the Bay Area. Earlier this year, a young river otter frolicked at the ruins of San Francisco's Sutro Baths. The otter, dubbed Sutro Sam, was the first otter spotted in the city in almost a half century. Sam eventually left the baths.

It is not impossible, but unlikely, that Sam swam across the bay to Oakland. But it is hard to tell otters apart, Isadore said.

"We know that there are otters all over in the Oakland area, and otters have a pretty variable social life," Isadore said. "He was probably just exploring, came to visit and see if there are a lot of other nice fish for him."

"He probably was there for a few days, and then he went somewhere with better fishing," Isadore added.

Conrad Jones, a wildlife biologist for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, said spotting an otter in Lake Merritt was "encouraging, certainly, but it is too early to say if what we are doing is paying off."

"The biggest milestone," Jones said, "is if it comes back, it stays, it successfully breeds, and those kids grow up."

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Google's Mystery Project Won't Float

A San Francisco regulator casts doubt on the viability of a waterborne Google store.

By Thomas Claburn, [InformationWeek](#)

October 28, 2013

URL: <http://www.informationweek.com/internet/google/googles-mystery-project-wont-float/240163220>



8 Phablets To Watch

(click image for larger view)

A mysterious barge docked off Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay might be home to a future floating showroom for Google products such as Glass. But if it is, Google's store-on-boat is not likely to open to the public, at least in the Bay Area.

Google's link to the barge was first reported on Friday by [CNET](#), which speculated that the massive, shrouded structure on the vessel could be a floating Google data center.

The same day, [KPIX 5](#) reported that the structure being built on the barge is intended to be a floating Google retail store and that Google aims to anchor its showroom at San Francisco's Fort Mason.

Brad McCrea, regulatory program director of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, confirmed in a phone interview that Google representatives have visited the SFBCDC to discuss the barge project but the reps did not provide much detail.

[**Don't believe every Internet trend. Read [How Google Flu Trends Blew It.](#)]**

"We still don't know exactly what it is," McCrea said. "They haven't been very clear on it."

Google did not respond to a request for comment. However, the company does appear to want to strengthen its retail presence. A job posting that went up two weeks ago suggests Google is preparing to expand its retail operations beyond kiosks operating in third-party stores. The company is seeking a [head of retail field operations](#) to "[d]efine the operating strategy and model for different retail formats including potentially store-in-stores, in-store kiosks, *own stores*, other creative format options."

Given Apple's success in retail and Microsoft's retail expansion, it would not be surprising if Google

sought to increase its retail presence to showcase its growing line of products, particularly now that it owns Motorola Mobility.

Whether Google is building an offshore store or a water-based data center, its ability to place that structure on the San Francisco Bay will depend on finding a way to operate within California State Law, obtaining an exemption, or lobbying to get the law changed. Under the [McAteer-Petris Act](#) (1965) and subsequent amendments, Google must have a permit to operate a moored facility, which qualifies as filling in the Bay.

Google has not formally sought a permit. And the act's requirements make it extremely unlikely the company could obtain one for a floating retail structure. The law allows filling in the Bay "only when public benefits from [doing so] clearly exceed public detriment from the loss of the water areas."

And the law limits such permits "to water-oriented uses (such as ports, water-related industry, airports, bridges, wildlife refuges, water-oriented recreation, and public assembly, water intake and discharge lines for desalinization plants and power generating plants requiring large amounts of water for cooling purposes) or minor fill for improving shoreline appearance or public access to the bay."

In addition, the law states that permits should be granted "only when no alternative upland location is available for such purpose." These legal difficulties make CNET's suggestion that Google is designing an off-shore data center sound more plausible.

McCrea said that if indeed Google has been building a floating retail facility, it will have to take its store elsewhere. He suggested that if Google were allowed to operate a floating store, other retailers like Target would seek permits for themselves.

"We certainly see the attraction of using the Bay for different reasons, but that's not what the people of California called for," McCrea said.

This isn't the first time companies and individuals have sought to push the boundaries of what's allowed on the San Francisco Bay. McCrea said there have been proposals for floating hotels, a football stadium designed to drift back and forth between San Francisco and Oakland, a modern version of Noah's Ark, and floating storage sheds.

McCrea urged Google to communicate its plans to the commission more clearly.



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Newest Regional Trail is IN the Bay

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October 24, 2013

While thousands of people enjoy walking, running and bicycling along the shoreline via the San Francisco Bay Trail, an emerging new trail invites exploration of the Bay itself. The Bay Area Water Trail is a growing network of launch and landing sites for kayakers, canoe paddlers, windsurfers and other non-motorized water craft on the Bay.

The State Coastal Conservancy is leading development of the trail, working closely with the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG). The Conservancy awarded ABAG a \$1 million grant in 2011 to help implement the plan and to initiate a grant program to help improve launch and landing sites. This month, the Conservancy authorized another \$750,000 to ABAG to further implement the plan and to add to Water Trail grants.

The Trail was created officially when the state Legislature passed the Water Trail Act in 2005, and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) stepped up to develop the Bay Water Trail Plan in 2007.

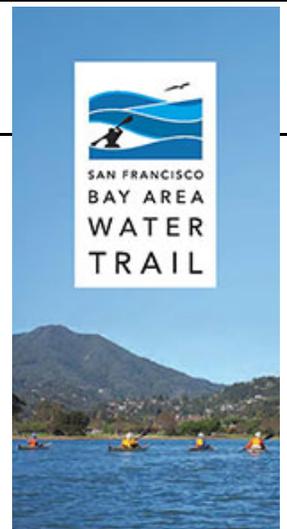
Although dozens of beaches and piers around the Bay already exist where small boats and boards can be launched, Water Trail planners envision a linked network of new and improved launching and landing sites that will entice more people to experience the fun of being on the Bay, including overnight camping getaways. The Trail mandate also includes promoting safe boating practices, reducing impacts on wildlife habitats, and generating greater appreciation and stewardship of the Bay.

To date, the Water Trail has five "designated" launch and landing sites that meet its criteria. The first to become part of the trail network is the Tidewater Boating Center on the Oakland Estuary. This small, East Bay Regional Park District oasis, tucked away in an industrial area off of High Street, has a Park District office, a parking lot, picnic tables, restrooms, and a large floating dock with two gangways, one of which is fully accessible to disabled persons, a high priority for Trail launching sites. From here, boaters can paddle south to San Leandro Bay, a good spot to view birds and seals, or head north toward Jack London Square past working industrial areas and on out into the Bay.

Ayala Cove on Angel Island is another designated Water Trail site where boaters can pull their boats onto the beach or share dingy slips. This state park has picnic areas, restrooms, a visitors' center, and an overnight camping area. In the

DOWNLOAD:

- [Water Trail Brochure \(PDF\)](#)



Water Trail sign (Photo: Laura Thompson)



Kayakers in Alviso Slough (Photo: Galli Basson)

South Bay, the Sailing Center in the Palo Alto Baylands Nature Preserve, a popular windsurfing site, has a pier where boaters can launch canoes, kayaks and windsurfing boards to explore the winding sloughs. The Alviso Marina County Park at the southern tip of the Bay is adjacent to salt ponds and marshes of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. From the park's two boat launch ramps, there is a clear route through the salt marshes to the open waters of the Bay. The most recent designation is Ferry Point Beach in Richmond. For those who don't own a boat, the Trail's website lists boating recreation programs by county, as well as numerous places to rent boats, join clubs and take classes

To encourage and assist more Bay Area communities and nonprofit organizations to create or improve suitable launch and landing sites, ABAG is managing the Coastal Conservancy grant funds for Water Trail site enhancements. (Information on applying for grants is available on the Water Trail website.) Water Trail signage and information at the launch sites about boater safety and wildlife stewardship are also in the works, and the Coastal Conservancy is developing a plan that outlines accessibility improvements for launch sites eligible for grant funds.

The incentive for creating a Water Trail actually began over a decade ago when Bay Access, a local, non-motorized boating club, determined to save boat launch sites around the Bay that were fast disappearing due to development. According to Bay Access President Penny Wells, "We decided to pursue state legislation, and the Water Trail Act, passed with flying colors in 2005."

Wells and other Water Trail supporters envision places all around the Bay where boaters can camp overnight, such as at Point Pinole in Richmond, or stay in a nearby waterfront hotel, such as in downtown Petaluma.

"The Bay is our largest open space," notes Galli Basson, ABAG's Water Trail planner. "And we have such a diversity of habitats – urban, natural, marshy wetlands, sandy beaches, and rivers. There's something for everyone on the Bay, from exciting experiences to quiet and peaceful ones. People travel long distances to visit places that they can experience right here on the Bay."

The Water Trail joins the other two regional trail systems in progress: the Bay Trail, which now covers more than 330 miles around the Bay, and the Bay Area Ridge Trail, a 550-mile trail along ridgelines overlooking the Bay. "The Water Trail will greatly increase opportunities for Bay Area residents to enjoy the beauty and wonders of our region," said Ann Buell, Coastal Conservancy Project Manager.

The Bay Area Water Trail has a logo, a website —www.sfbaywatertrail.org—and a colorful brochure, which can be downloaded from its website.

— *Marjorie Blackwell*



Kayakers in Alviso Slough (Photo: Laura Thompson)



Kayakers in the Napa River (Photo: Galli Basson)



Outrigger canoers with O Kalani Outrigger Canoe Club, Alameda (Photo: Galli Basson)



Stand up paddler in Benicia (Photo: Galli Basson)



Harbor seals in Sausalito (Photo: Lyrinda Snyderman)

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