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America's Cup Settlement Will Aid Bird Knowledge and Protection

SAN FRANCISCO -- Golden Gate Audubon Society hailed a settlement with organizers of the America's Cup yacht race that will significantly boost our understanding of and ability to protect birds on the San Francisco Bay.

The settlement – approved by San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee on July 18 – clears the path for the world-renowned race to proceed, while protecting birds that rely on the waters and shoreline of San Francisco Bay.

“Like so many other Bay Area residents, we’re looking forward to the America’s Cup,” said GGAS Conservation Director Mike Lynes. “The San Francisco Bay is a vital place for birds and we’re delighted that the event can go forward with due protections for birds and other wildlife.”

GGAS had joined other community groups including the Sierra Club, San Francisco Tomorrow, and Waterfront Watch to appeal the environmental impact report for the America’s Cup, which involves a series of yachting events in late summer 2012 and 2013.

Under the settlement, the city of San Francisco will provide \$150,000 for the U.S. Geological Survey to do a three-year study of boating impacts on birds that rest and feed on the central Bay.

The city also agreed to abandon plans for a floating Jumbotron video screen that had been proposed for the waters off of Aquatic Park.

In separate discussions, the city promised to cordon off and monitor a section of Crissy Field that is home to a colony of endangered Snowy Plovers, to ensure that race spectators won't disturb the birds.

"The America's Cup organizers have been extremely receptive to adopting measures to monitor and protect birds, other wildlife, and native plants and wildlife during the races," Lynes said. "This settlement funds a study that will inform management of birds during the America's Cup and other major events that occur on the Bay."

The USGS will conduct surveys before, during and after the America's Cup events to determine how boating activity affects bird populations on the Bay. The America's Cup Environmental Impact Report estimated that approximately 1800 spectator boats will carry 18,000 spectators onto the Bay, sharing the already-busy Bay waters with rafting ducks, grebes, and cormorants.

"For the first time, we'll have information on the numbers of birds in the central Bay and how they are respond to boats and other disturbances," Lynes said. "This will help us minimize future disruptions of birds on the open water – whether those disruptions come from daily marine traffic, special events like yacht races, or unexpected disasters like oil spills."

The USGS survey will cover the central San Francisco Bay, from North Richmond to South San Francisco. Particularly in winter, the San Francisco Bay draws large populations of feeding and resting birds such as Double-

crested Cormorants, Greater and Lesser Scaup, Buffleheads, Surf Scoters, Western Gulls and several kinds of grebes.

These “rafting” birds rely on the Bay – the most important estuary on the Pacific Flyway -- to nourish and reenergize them for future migrations and breeding.

Yet there’s much less Bay than there used to be. Ninety percent of the San Francisco Bay’s wetlands and forty percent of its open water have been lost to landfill and human development since 1850. The remaining open water is heavily used by shipping, ferries, recreational boating and other activities. The Bay is recognized as a site of international importance for birds, particularly waterfowl and shorebirds. Birds and other wildlife rely on the habitat that remains, and conservationists are concerned about the impacts of new projects and traffic on bird populations.

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