



# Environmentalists, political leaders push to derail San Francisco Bay Saltworks development

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[REDWOOD CITY](#) – A proposal to construct the largest [housing development](#) on the shores of [San Francisco Bay](#) in more than 40 years has run headlong into a phalanx of environmentalists and politicians who want to derail the project even before initial environmental studies begin.

The so-called Saltworks 50-50 Plan would build as many as 12,000 [housing units](#) on about 1,400 acres of what is now a retired salt production facility just east of Highway 101, not far from the San Mateo Bridge in [Redwood City](#).

The proposal, being pitched by agribusiness giant Cargill Inc. and Arizona-based [DMB Associates](#), has come under political fire in recent weeks by more than 100 environmental and political leaders who signed a petition asking [Redwood City](#) officials to cease any further consideration of the proposal.

"Nothing so breathtaking in size or misguided in scope has been proposed in half a century," reads the preamble to the Feb. 26 petition circulated by Oakland-based Save the [Bay](#).

"Salt ponds are not land to be paved," the petition continues. "They are part of [San Francisco Bay](#) to be restored to tidal marsh for [wildlife habitat](#), natural [flood protection](#) for our communities, cleaner water and recreation areas for everyone to enjoy."

The list of petition signers reads like a [Bay Area](#) who's who, including state Sen. [Mark Leno](#) and [Assemblyman Tom Ammiano](#) of San Francisco, Oakland Mayor [Ron Dellums](#), and [David Chiu](#), president of the [San Francisco Board of Supervisors](#).

Officials from all nine [Bay Area](#) counties have signed it, including 13 mayors, 11 members of the [Association of Bay Area Governments](#) and eight members of the [San Francisco Bay](#) Conservation and Development Commission.

[David Lewis](#), executive director of Save the [Bay](#), called the project unprecedented since a 1965 state law called the McAteer-Petris Act gave birth to what is now the [27-member Bay](#)

[Conservation and Development Commission](#). The law has served as the key legal provision preserving the [bay](#) from being indiscriminately filled.

"We don't pave over restorable wetlands. We don't need an EIR to tell us that," Lewis said, using shorthand for a state-required environmental impact report.

To be sure, officials acknowledge that the [bay](#) is one-third smaller than it was during the state's Gold Rush of 1848-1855 as a result of developers filling in the waterway.

But according to [David Smith](#), a [DMB Associates](#) vice president, the project wouldn't be built on either [bay](#) fill or a former tidal marsh, but on land used in industrial salt production since 1901.

"We're perplexed as to why these [Bay](#) Area environmental groups and these political leaders would want to stop the [CEQA](#) process," Smith said, referring to the [California Environmental Quality Act](#), which requires environmental review of such development. "If anything, you would think they would want to get all the facts out about this project."

Smith says Minnesota-based Cargill and DMB see the proposal as a chance to build high-quality, transit-oriented housing for Silicon Valley-area workers who now commute from far away. As currently designed, the development would accommodate about 30,000 people and feature a large number of upscale apartments and condos.

Saltworks project proponents have been floating the idea around [Redwood City](#) for the past three or four years. What's changed in recent weeks is that [Redwood City](#) officials have started looking for consultants to put together the environmental impact report that [CEQA](#) requires. It's expected to take from 18 to 24 months to complete.

[Redwood City](#) Mayor [Jeff Ira](#) says the environmental study must be allowed to proceed.

"I appreciate how passionate people are about this – I really do," Ira said last week. "But the study will provide us with important information that we don't have now. ... Only then, with that information, can we make the best decision possible."

Even so, Lewis and other critics say they plan to keep pressuring Ira and the [Redwood City](#) Council until the panel drops the Saltworks project entirely.

If the coalition is successful, Lewis said, the next step would be for federal authorities or a nonprofit conservation group to buy the land and let it revert to a tidal marsh. Examples of similar efforts dot the South [Bay](#) and Peninsula shorelines and surround the Saltworks property.

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors President [John Gioia](#), a veteran member of the [Bay Conservation and Development Commission](#) and one of the eight commissioners who signed the petition, agrees.

"This proposal is a direct assault on the whole [Bay](#) Area," Gioia said in a statement. "We all have a stake in what happens in [Redwood City](#). It's about habitat (and) biological diversity. The [bay](#) defines our quality of life and who we are."

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