



Bay Environment  
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## A Vision for San Francisco Bay

San Francisco Bay is a dynamic and scenic estuary that serves the Bay Area on many levels. It offers an important avenue for transportation, commerce and recreation, and nourishes a complex ecosystem that supports waterfowl, wildlife, fish, and wetlands. The steel-green waters of the Bay give the region an environmental character unlike any in the world, making me wonder how a new fleet of ferries might change this familiar profile in the long-term.

Growing the existing small commuter and recreational ferry fleet comprising less than two dozen boats into a regionwide water transit system will dramatically transform the Bay's waters and shoreline. The proposed ferry plan calls for thirty or more new vessels, seven new routes and eight new terminals in ten years. To meet the needs of transit riders, the ferries must criss-cross the Bay every 15 to 30 minutes. As a result, ferry trips across the Bay are projected to jump from 80,000 trips per year to 914,180 by 2025, a ten-fold increase.

Add the new water transit system to a doubling or tripling of the number of cruise ships, container ships and other large vessels entering the Bay over the next two decades, and the result appears to be a body of water destined to become busied with marine activity—probably the most since the days of steam ferries or sailing ships.

Other visions also compete for a role in the Bay's future, ranging from major port expansions and a new cruise terminal to filling the Bay for airport expansion, to ongoing and renewed efforts to restore wetlands, tidal marshes, and protecting and enhancing the integrity of the Pacific Flyway. A port official once shared with me a vision of transforming the mostly open waters of the Bay into another crowded Hong Kong harbor, where you can almost walk from boat-to-boat across the water without ever getting your feet wet.

Ultimately, Bluewater Network sees the need for a long-term plan for San Francisco Bay that combines conservation, restoration, and protection of water quality with clean water transit, sustainable ports, recreation, and protection of its natural beauty.

To create a sustainable vision, we need to start asking questions. We need to find out just how many ferries and ships can be accommodated without injury to the environment, function and beauty of the Bay. How many ferries do we really need and how fast do we really need to go? How many cruise ships do we really need? Will migrating birds begin to avoid a crowded Bay? Can we effectively build new wetlands to replace the ones that are lost to development? Will whales be struck down along their ancient migration routes by transiting vessels?

So while we urge caution in going forward with the ferry plan, we also see that the expansion of the ferry fleet provides an opportunity to improve mobility in the Bay Area and put the cleanest possible passenger ferries into service, setting a standard for all future ferry fleets.

The ferry plan and environmental review Bluewater Network applauds the groundbreaking work of the San Francisco Water Transit Authority in setting a new standard for low-emissions vessels that will be ten times cleaner than today's dirty diesels and for investigating seriously and in-depth the potential environmental impacts of the proposed new system. The new ferries must meet the WTA standard of 85 percent below EPA Tier 2 – 2007 in the first ten-year phase or the Bay Area will suffer significant air quality impacts.

The ferry plan and the draft program Environmental Impact Report (DPEIR) are broad and informative documents that gives ferry planners and policy makers most of what they need for moving forward. It identifies many potential environmental impacts and suggests measures for preventing air and water pollution, loss of wetlands and habitat, disturbance of marine mammals and wildlife, and other impacts such as noise, growth inducement and energy use.

At the same time, questions and information gaps remain. The environmental community has extensive comments and questions on air quality, wildlife protection, energy use and environmental justice, among others. Many subjects need clarification, more information and further study at the program level.

For example, a more detailed plan for achieving the air emissions mandate is needed. We are recommending the early construction of a pilot fleet boat that would allow the WTA to ensure that such a vessel will be reliable and meet the standards. If it does not, it gives the WTA the opportunity to change the technology before ordering additional boats without jeopardizing service.

We are also concerned about inconsistencies between the draft ferry plan and environmental document. The WTA should reconcile EIR findings with the ferry plan.

We believe that the unusually short timetable given to the WTA by the Legislature to complete the ferry plan and the environmental document should not allow any potential shortcutting of the process. More time should be expended on environmental studies and the ferry plan if needed. This is the only way that we can be sure to protect the Bay from harm while providing a clean water transit system.