Once spanning over 200,000 acres, however, the Bay has lost an estimated 85 percent of its historic wetlands. Those wetlands formed an important natural buffer to flooding from king tides and climate change-induced sea level rise. Their loss places Bay Area communities—including some of the most developed urban areas in the state—at severe risk. It also increases the danger to levees farther inland, and the associated risk of salt water intrusion into California’s freshwater supply. With such threats looming, finding a way to restore the Bay and its wetlands was—and remains—crucial to the well being of the region and state, as well as the Pacific Flyway.

In response to this need, beginning in 2001, Resources Legacy Fund helped catalyze and lead a public-private partnership to acquire and restore 16,500 acres of salt ponds ringing the South Bay and Napa County. Cargill Salt, Incorporated, had expressed interest in selling the properties, but protecting wetlands at this scale in an area of such valuable real estate was unprecedented. RLF engaged with California’s senior U.S. senator, Dianne Feinstein, and garnered support from state and federal agencies as well as prominent Bay Area foundations. Advising the senator as she championed the project, while providing strategic guidance to project partners along the way, RLF oversaw assessment of the property’s value, helped negotiate a $100 million purchase price, secured public and private funds, and structured the deal. In 2003, with state and federal funding and contributions from the Goldman Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, RLF finalized the transaction that transferred the property to the federal and state authorities. Yet while protecting the property was itself a monumental conservation victory, the purchase of the 100-year-old salt ponds was just the first step in reversing the trend of crucial wetland loss in the region.
Building on the historic deal, RLF secured $35 million in new public and philanthropic funding to support five years of initial stewardship and long-term restoration planning for the salt ponds. Because some species had adapted to life in industrial salt ponds, careful planning and management of restoration activities was crucial to ensuring that new habitats could provide refuge for sensitive existing species while attracting new species and increasing overall diversity. RLF identified, convened, and supported a team of expert managers and consultants who developed and successfully implemented a short-term strategy for stabilizing salinity and maximizing wildlife habitats in the salt ponds. In addition, RLF worked with the federal and state agencies managing the newly acquired salt ponds, in close coordination with the State Coastal Conservancy, to develop a long-term vision and restoration plan that incorporated scientific and public input. RLF led these efforts to a timely and under-budget conclusion, using the savings to leverage bond funds to pay for additional restoration designs as well as implementation, monitoring, and analysis of pilot projects that provided the scientific basis for long-term restoration.

RLF has remained engaged, leading a multi-faceted effort to continue restoration of the salt ponds as well as San Francisco baylands more broadly. In 2012, RLF helped create the San Francisco Baylands Steering Committee, a diverse alliance of community, business, and foundation leaders working to advance policies and increase federal, state, and local funding to restore regional habitat and improve flood protection. Under this effort, starting in early 2015 RLF managed an innovative, award-winning public education campaign—Our Bay on the Brink—to increase awareness of threats to the Bay, along with potential solutions. In June 2016, Bay Area voters passed Measure AA, which will raise $500 million over 20 years from a parcel tax. The funds will be used to match state and federal funding to support wildlife and wetlands restoration, trails and recreational facilities along the Bay shoreline, and flood protection for shoreline communities.

RLF’s San Francisco baylands work aligns with intensifying concerns in all coastal communities—and in state and national policy circles—regarding global climate change and sea level rise, making it a potentially significant model for adaptation to the impacts of climate change. Its components—acquisition, restoration, and public outreach—demonstrate RLF’s ability to engage elected leaders, government agencies, major foundations, and other diverse interests in a strategic manner on a complex problem. RLF secured and thoughtfully deployed resources to advance one of the largest restoration projects in the United States, for the recovery of crucial habitat with the potential to reduce the effects of tidal surges, sea level rise, and other long-term impacts of climate change. At the same time, it will provide invaluable recreational and educational resources for the people of the Bay Area and beyond, and ensure the economic vitality of this globally important region.