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## Coastal wetlands project shows progress halfway to completion

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DEL MAR — The birds are already casing the place, despite the rumbling excavators and bulldozers busily digging and hauling soil along a network of dirt roads.

They are endangered California least terns, and when the machinery is gone, there will be nesting sites for them and Belding's Savannah sparrows.

Their new homes — five nesting sites are being built around San Dieguito Lagoon for endangered and threatened waterfowl — will be part of a wetlands preserve, which planners hope will draw all kinds of migratory and salt marsh birds as well as raptors, plus fish, reptiles and mammals ranging from mice to coyotes.

The envisioned preserve, which will be accessible by viewing platforms, a visitors center and a trail that will be linked with one reaching from the ocean to Julian, will be completed in early 2009.

The San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project, a massive and expensive undertaking that began more than a year ago, is now at the halfway point.

When finished, 150 acres of wetlands on both sides of Interstate 5 south of Via de la Valle will have been returned to their natural state, similar to the way they were before farming and construction of the Del Mar Fairgrounds and a World War II airfield.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune  
When the San Dieguito restoration is finished, in early 2009, 150 acres of coastal wetlands will have been returned to their natural state. This view shows some of the western part of the project, which straddles Interstate 5 at Via de la Valle, with the freeway in the foreground and Del Mar Fairgrounds in the background.



LANE GOODKIND  
This rendering looks due east from above San Dieguito Road in Del Mar above the old Grand Avenue bridge at the 42-acre subtidal lagoon being built as part of the wetlands preserve.

That, said Del Mar Mayor Carl Hilliard, has been "a Del Mar dream for a long, long time."

The coastal lagoons are stopping points along the bird-migration route known as the Pacific Flyway, and they serve as hatcheries for fish. Yet most of the state's coastal wetlands have been destroyed by development, making this restoration vital.

And the work has quite the audience. Thousands of vehicles pass by on the I-5 freeway every day, and many no doubt wonder what is going on. Some worry that they are witnessing the construction of homes or a shopping center, and they complain to public officials.

On busy days, the site resembles an ant farm, the earthmovers methodically transferring material from one spot to the next on a self-contained system of dirt roads.

The three-year, \$86 million project is being paid for by Southern California Edison as a way to make up for the loss of marine life at its San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station north of Oceanside.

"We have a great project in our town that the taxpayers aren't paying a dime for," contractor Mike Furby said.

Furby is president of Marathon Construction Co., which has 28 pieces of heavy equipment on the site and 16 subcontractors, from geotechnical engineers and paleontologists to archaeologists and biologists. Construction crews have built a network of roads allowing them to remain on-site for all their work and off public roads.

So far, crews have removed what remained of the airfield, adjacent to the fairgrounds, and dug a lagoon in its place, removing more than 800,000 cubic yards of dirt to areas east of Interstate 5. About 200,000 cubic yards have been removed from an area north of the lagoon, which will be low-and midmarsh habitats.

Dirt and sand from one area is stockpiled in another, where it waits to be used for nesting sites and the construction of 8,000 feet of berms that will protect the wetlands in the event of a major flood. Topsoil, rich in seeds, also is being saved for the upland coastal scrub habitat.

"We're going to try to do all the planting next fall, so we'll get the winter rain and it'll be going by spring," Furby said.

By the time it is completed, 2 million cubic yards of earth will have been excavated. Early in 2009, the San Dieguito River mouth will be opened, and it will be kept open permanently to allow the ocean water in and out of the wetlands with the tide. It will take two to three years after completion for all the plant life to grow in.

The power company will maintain the wetlands preserve until 2050, when the role will be assumed by the San Dieguito Joint Powers Authority. The authority, formed in 1989 as an agency with representatives from the county and five city governments, is responsible for acquiring land in the San Dieguito River Valley for the San Dieguito River Park, a natural open-space park stretching from the beach in Del Mar to Volcan Mountain near Julian.

Southern California Edison began acquiring permits for the restoration in 1991; construction began last year.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune  
The Grand Avenue bridge will be kept and used as a viewing area near Del Mar Fairgrounds. Several viewing platforms are planned for the preserve.

Samir Tanious, the company's project manager, has been on the project for 15 years.

"People have created lagoons everywhere, but this is very unique," Tanious said.

In the early planning stages, there was a leaning toward digging a deep lagoon, like Batiquitos Lagoon in Carlsbad, restored in 1996 as a mitigation project by the Port of Los Angeles.

Then other ideas were considered, Tanious said. A plan was created for a mixed-habitat preserve, where parts of the land at times would be covered with water and at others would be mud flats.

Similar restoration projects have shown that it is possible to entice migratory birds, Tanious said. You just have to make the spot attractive. Least terns, for example, prefer coarse white sand with some encrusted shells.

"Once you create that ecosystem, they will come to it," Tanious said.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune

Even as heavy equipment rumbles about, several species of birds have checked out the habitat and found it to their liking. Five nesting sites are being built around San Dieguito Lagoon for endangered and threatened waterfowl.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune

Construction equipment working on the massive restoration must maintain a certain distance from sensitive habitat. The three-year, \$86 million project is being paid for by Southern California Edison as a way to make up for loss of marine life at its San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

On a recent morning, Furby and Tanious stood on one of the berms, which are built with drainpipes cutting through them at about 8 feet above the water level. In case of a major flood, the pipes would relieve the swollen river.

"These berms are designed to protect the wetland and continue the sediment transfer to the beaches," Tanious said.

Right now, this place is all water and dirt at varying levels. It takes imagination to see what it one day will be. Yet it apparently has appeal.

Across the water from the berm, a great blue heron stood in the reeds, seeming not to mind the whizzing traffic on Interstate 5 or the earthmover chugging along with another load of dirt.

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