

Lagoon restoration is now on track save for one key approval

By Erin Spry

The San Dieguito Lagoon restoration, a project bringing together several entities with one central goal, has been through more than 15 years of complications during the painstaking planning process. Now cleared of every hurdle but one, planners hope to begin construction by spring, but obtaining their final permit could delay the restoration by months.

The 150-acre project, aiming to restore the lagoon's tidal flows, natural habitats and vegetation, is anticipated to take approximately three years to complete.

The lagoon restoration is a complex issue involving state, local and federal agencies as well as a number of concerned residents who have pushed for such a project for years.

"There are many fingers in this pie," said David Kay, manager of environmental projects for Southern California Edison, the utility company managing the restoration.

The pending permit, the last of 21, is from the California Coastal Commission. Though the commission has given general approval for the restoration plans as a whole, the devil's in the details, said Kay.

The delay in the final permit is presenting a serious problem, according to Kay. In order for construction to start in spring, as was hoped, workers have to start preparing the project area in because of the permit delay, construction will have to be pushed off until fall in order to avoid the upcoming nesting season for lagoon birds.

The first phase of construction will focus on the areas south of the San Dieguito River and near the I-5. The selected contractor, Marathon Construction, will be clearing the site of vegetation so they can start the sand excavation.

The project calls for approximately 125,000 cubic yards of sand to be excavated. The majority of that sand will be used to construct lease tern nesting sites, a requirement of Edison's coastal development permit. The remaining sand of good quality — probably anywhere from 25,000 to 50,000 cubic yards — will be deposited onto the local beaches.

Later, the river channel itself will be excavated and the planting process will begin. Much of the vegetation cleared during the start of construction will be salvaged and maintained for replanting, in addition to the new plant species

that will be reintroduced to the wetlands to create a lush and healthy environment.

Recon, an environmental consulting firm, will be overseeing the entire restoration. In addition to the biologists working with the vegetation aspects, archaeologists and paleontologists will be on hand to recover and protect any artifacts or natural resources discovered during construction.

After the restoration is completed, it will take an additional two to three years for the lagoon to be naturally functioning, flourishing with a healthy amount of plant and wild life.

The project also plans for a visitor's center for spectators or people traveling along the San Dieguito River Park's 55-mile, coast-to-crest trail.

In order to ensure the least impact on local residents during construction, temporary gates will be set up for the worker crews at El Camino Real and Via de la Valle, and all sand dredging and relocation will be done on the site itself. The only traffic impact will result from the arrival and departure of construction workers.

Edison has worked diligently with the various agencies over the years to ensure a successful restoration, which will ultimately affect 440 acres of wetlands in the San Dieguito River Valley.

The coastal commission required the company to take on the project in 1991 to mitigate for the construction of large seawater cooling systems for the San Onofre nuclear power plant, which is owned and operated by Edison. These tanks, which take in large amounts of seawater every day, account for the loss of nearly 3,000 tons of adult fish each year in destroyed eggs and larvae.

Edison is also required to maintain the lagoon for 40 years after it is fully functioning. After several years of close monitoring, the company will likely deposit at least \$1 million into an endowment fund, which the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority will use for all future upkeep.

By the time their role in the restoration is complete, Edison will probably have spent close to \$86 million on the project.

Their efforts have not gone unnoticed. Several residents who have remained involved in the restoration have commended Kay and his company for their hard work.

"They're doing a good job," said Barbara Stegman, who lives close to the lagoon. "They've run into a lot of problems, and they've coped with what they've run into very well."

Freda Reid, a member of the San Dieguito Lagoon Committee who has followed the project since it first began, said working with Edison has been wonderful, and the plan they have worked out is the best and most hopeful for the lagoon.