

Believe it! Work's set to start on San Dieguito Lagoon

\$86 million overhaul has been 15 years in planning

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DEL MAR – Finally.

After 15 years of planning and two years waiting for a passel of local, state and federal agencies to issue the dozens of permits required – not to mention the nesting birds that couldn't be disturbed – work is set to begin on an \$86 million overhaul of the San Dieguito Lagoon.

Crews will begin cutting vegetation by mid-September, the first step in restoring the 440-acre wetland between Del Mar and Solana Beach.

Last week, the California Coastal Commission issued a letter authorizing the work to start. Permits for the entire restoration are expected in the mail any day after some administrative matters are met, said David Kay, manager of environmental projects for Southern California Edison.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
A snowy egret flew over the San Dieguito Lagoon yesterday. Work on restoring the wetland to a more natural state will begin in mid-September.

Once restored, the lagoon at high tide will be knee-deep in salt water, supporting a population of crabs, small mammals and birds and providing fish with a place to spawn and grow.

The lagoon outlet will permanently open to the Pacific, rather than periodically clogging with sand and turning the wetlands into a fetid deathtrap.

“By 2010 it should be walking and talking like a natural wetland,” Kay said.

Southern California Edison is restoring the lagoon to compensate for the loss of fish eggs and larvae attributed to the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station 33 miles to the north. The plant's two nuclear reactors each use about 1 billion gallons of seawater a day as coolant.

Planning for the makeover began in 1991, but that first whack at the weeds in about two weeks hasn't been easy to come by.

In addition to obtaining the California Coastal Commission's stamp of approval, Edison has secured permits from, among others, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the California Department of Fish and Game, the California Water Quality Control Board, the

California State Lands Commission, the California Department of Transportation, and the cities of Del Mar and San Diego.

The Coastal Commission, which has the final say on the matter, actually issued the all-important coastal development permit on Oct. 18 of last year, said Ellen Lirley, a staff planner with the commission.

But that wasn't a green light for work to begin and, to some observers, it was beginning to look as if the project was on indefinite hold.

"We had a celebration about a year ago when we heard that the Coastal Commission had approved the project, but the fact that it took another year to actually issue the (go-ahead) caused a lot of consternation in the community," Del Mar City Councilman Jerry Finnell said Monday.

Others, like Jan McMillan of Del Mar's San Dieguito Lagoon Preservation Committee, an advisory board to the City Council, saw the glass as half full.

"Of course we're very happy," she said Monday. "But it's taken so long to get to this point that everybody was getting impatient for the work to start."

The plan now is for workers to start clearing brush in project area 2A, which is west of the Interstate 5 bridge and south of the San Dieguito River, Mike Furby of Marathon Construction Corp. said yesterday. Marathon, with headquarters in Lakeside, is the project contractor.

"We were ready to attack the job with a vengeance in January, but we didn't get all the permits, and then it was bird season," Furby said.

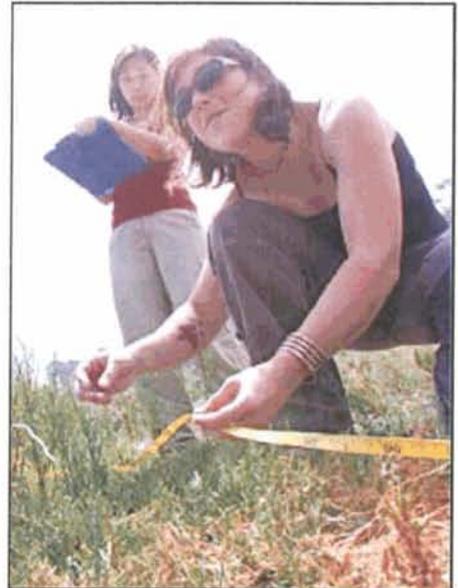
Now the birds will have to find someplace else to hatch their eggs, at least until the end of 2008, when the major work is finished, Kay said.

Once the vegetation is removed, workers will begin moving more than 2 million cubic yards of earth to create 115 acres of tidal salt marsh; will build four nesting sites and rehabilitate an existing one for the endangered California least tern and the Western snowy plover; will construct a mile of earthen berms to protect the wetland from flood-borne sediments carried by the San Dieguito River; will replace lost sand on Del Mar's beaches; and will open the mouth of the San Dieguito River on a permanent basis.

Both Southern California Edison and Marathon say the restoration work will have minimal impact on people living in the area. All excavated material will stay on site, only a few pieces of heavy equipment will be in use at any time, and no work will be done at night or on weekends.

"This has probably been one of the most scrutinized projects in the history of mankind," Del Mar's Finnell said of the permit process.

The scrutiny will continue during restoration.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
Ph.D. candidates Laurie Monarres (left) and Stacey Jensen recorded species of vegetation yesterday near the edge of the lagoon for a combined UCLA and Army Corps of Engineers study.

SoCal Edison and Marathon will have engineers and biologists on site to "self-monitor" the lagoon and the San Dieguito River Park will employ its own "super-monitor," Kay said.

Coastal Commission experts are to ensure that restoration fully mitigates the wildlife losses at San Onofre, Lirley said.

The hope is to resurrect the faltering wetland after decades of encroachment by the Del Mar Fairgrounds, a shopping center, an abandoned airfield, residential development, an interstate highway and acres of tomato fields.

The project area covers both sides of Interstate 5. It extends from the mouth of the San Dieguito River east to El Camino Real, bordered on the north by Via de la Valle and on the south by the Del Mar bluff.

As for who's going to pay for all this, Southern California Edison customers will cover 70 percent of the \$86 million price tag. In return for their share of power from San Onofre, San Diego Gas & Electric Co. ratepayers will pay 20 percent, and utility users in the cities of Anaheim and Riverside 5 percent each.

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