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Lagoon project clears final hurdle

By Jim Kerr

A conditional compliance letter from the California Coastal Commission will allow the commencement of work on the long-anticipated San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project.

The approval allows the project's contractor, Marathon Construction, to start work immediately on initial surveying and examination of sensitive bird nesting areas before trucks roll.

The permit was considered the last piece of what has become a puzzle of approvals needed to start the project, which has been in some degree of planning since 1990.

The large-scale mitigation effort of utility giant Southern California Edison, involves a complete restoration of 150 acres of tidal wetlands, a permanent opening of the lagoon's river mouth at what is commonly referred to as Dog Beach or North Beach in Del Mar, the start of a 55-mile coast-to-crest trail across the San Dieguito River Valley, and the placement of nesting sites for California least terns and Western Snowy Plovers along with 15 acres set aside for other natural habitat.

"It's about time," said Del Mar Mayor Crystal Crawford of the final approval. "It's been long awaited and greatly anticipated."

According to Samir Tanious, project manager from Southern California Edison, information will still need to be continuously provided to the Coastal Commission as work commences, but for all intents and purposes, the project is finally a go.

"It's an indication of the start of plenty of good things," said Tanious.

The compliance letter allows Marathon to begin clearing and grubbing certain areas and importing rock revetment and other miscellaneous rocks onto the site. Tanious says that excavation will first start at what was years ago, the site of a Del Mar airfield just west of Interstate 5.

Eventually 125,000 cubic yards of sand will be removed, a large portion to be deposited on a site off of Via de la Valle. Water, seeds and fertilizer will assist in growing plants at that site in an attempt to make the area as natural as possible.

Equipment that will be used during initial work scheduled to start next month includes rock-hauling trucks: water truck, a bulldozer and rubber tire loader. Construction will take place 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The restoration project has a long, and rather complicated, history. At its core is the mitigation requirement of Southern California Edison.

The construction of large, seawater cooling tanks at the company's San Onofre nuclear generating plant resulted in a large-scale fish kill. To mitigate that environmental damage, the company was required by the state to restore a natural area, which ended up being the San Dieguito Lagoon and its accompanying wetlands. The company is also required to maintain the area for 40 years.

With part of the mitigation agreement involving the permanent opening of the river mouth, concerns over sand loss in the immediate area, and damage to Del Mar's beach, resulted in a lawsuit being filed by a group of beachfront homeowners and the formation of a community group known as "Save the Beach."

After an initial judgment by a San Diego Superior Court judge ruled in favor of the homeowners by finding inadequacies in an environmental impact report, a state appeals court overturned the lower court's opinion allowing the permitting process for the project to commence.

The permitting process was an arduous one, stretching over an almost three-year period.

In that time, a consulting firm hired by Southern California Edison has constantly monitored the health of the lagoon.

They measure lagoon water oxygen levels and temperature, salinity and PH levels. Those results are forwarded to Del Mar's San Dieguito Lagoon Committee on behalf of the city.

Those levels are currently in the range of being dangerously unhealthy, with dissolved oxygen levels at a zero ppm reading, according to Dawn Rawls, the committee's chair.

"It is an environment where we will now start to see fish die and float to the surface," said Rawls. "There is also a lot of algae growing which tends to smother the lagoon. It (river mouth) has to be opened as soon as possible."

According to Tanious, emergency permit applications have been submitted to the Coastal Commission to open the river mouth, which is completely closed off at the present time.

The opening would be in advance of the larger permanent opening procedure to come later.

Rawls, like Crawford and Tanious, is excited that the restoration project has cleared its final hurdle.

"I'm elated," Rawls said. "I'm ebullient. I've had a lot of phone calls and everyone is so excited."

For more information, a project information hotline has been set up at (858) 259-1955.