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Work on \$86 million lagoon restoration to begin

By: ADAM KAYE - Staff Writer

DEL MAR ---- After nearly 15 years of planning, legal wrangling and securing permits, an \$86 million restoration of the San Dieguito Lagoon is to begin this month.



*Sea birds spend time in the San Dieguito Lagoon in Del Mar.*

*North County Times File Photo*

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Once the nesting season for endangered birds ends ---- Sept. 15 -

--- crews can begin clearing vegetation and staging equipment for a job that will shuffle 2.1 million cubic yards of earth around the river valley between Del Mar and Solana Beach, project planners said last week.

The restoration encompasses 440 acres and extends from the lagoon's outlet at Del Mar's north beach east to El Camino Real.

Keeping that lagoon mouth open ---- it's now plugged by a wide berm of sand ---- is a key component of the project, said David W. Kay, environmental programs manager for Southern California Edison.

The utility is paying for the project to compensate for marine life killed by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, which sucks 2.5 billion gallons of ocean water daily through its cooling system north of Oceanside near the Orange County line.

Permanent tidal flushing and man-made basins in the San Dieguito Lagoon will produce a thriving ecosystem for fish to spawn and birds to nest, Kay said.

The lagoon's outlet to the ocean is now clogged and a vast bloom of algae is spreading across the backwaters. Concerned about a possible die-off of fish, the utility is planning to open it later this month. The river's mouth stays closed much of the year, opening only during winters of heavy rains or when a channel is bulldozed to release the stagnant water.

In addition to offering a permanent remedy for sand blockage of the lagoon outlet, the restoration project will create new marshes, mud flats and underwater habitat on land that, over the years, had been filled in for tomato fields and an airfield.

The largest of the basins will be created where the airstrip once operated, just west of Interstate 5 and south of San Dieguito River. The basin will be part of the project's 160 acres of man-made wetlands.

The project also calls for the creation of 16 acres of nesting sites for endangered birds. Some species, such as

the snowy plover, are especially finicky and will nest only on a vegetation-free island capped by white sand.

The restoration will take two to three years of on-again, off-again digging to complete, because environmental laws prohibit the enormous excavation all at once. Digging is off-limits during the summer, for instance, because of the endangered bird species that nest in the area. Also, air pollution laws restrict the amount of exhaust that can be released during given time periods, and moving truckload after truckload of sand and silt could exceed those levels.

Some of the dredged material will be used to create berms around the basins and along the river channel. The project is designed for tidal flow to flush the basins while the river flows unimpeded to the sea, Kay said.

Some of the berms will have quarter-ton of rock as their foundation, and delivery of that rock is one of the first orders of business later this month, said Mike Furby of Marathon Construction Corp., the Lakeside firm hired to build the project.

Also this month, crews will begin removing vegetation from places along the eastern reaches of the project where the excavated material will be stockpiled, cordoned off and plowed right back into the project later.

Nutrients in that soil will be invaluable when portions of the project area are seeded with native plants.

"Digging the holes is not too difficult, creating the new wetlands is not extremely difficult, but the way we move material around and salvage it will be the success of the planting," Furby said.

During construction, scientists specializing in birds, plants, geology, archeology and paleontology will monitor the job. The bird specialists will fan out across the project area to make sure any endangered birds are gone before construction begins, Kay said.

Scientific oversight is one of many conditions outlined in the permits issued by nearly a dozen local and state agencies.

At the west end of the project, Edison has agreed to keep track of sand levels near the lagoon outlet for 15 years.

In 2000, concerns that a permanently-opened river channel would erode the beach drove a group in Del Mar to challenge the project's environmental impact report in Superior Court.

Judge Lisa Guy-Schall sided with Del Mar Sandy Lane Association's argument, but in 2003 an appellate court overturned her ruling, saying the report provided adequate detail. Defending the project caused more than two years' delay and cost about \$150,000 in legal fees, Kay said.

With the first phases of construction set to begin in a matter of weeks, Edison will bear the cost of opening the river's outlet to the ocean.

Heavy equipment is scheduled to begin cutting a long and narrow channel into the sand during the week of Sept. 10, said planners in the San Diego office of the state Coastal Commission.

In the past, the city of Del Mar has appealed to its neighbors to contribute to help pay the cost of unplugging the river channel, which some years in the past has exceeded \$100,000.

Edison is obligated to keep the lagoon mouth open and flowing for as long as the nuclear power plant remains in operation, Kay said.

Beyond that, when the utility's obligations are completed, an endowment fund managed by the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority will pay for future maintenance of the channel and adjoining wetland.

Del Mar Councilman Jerry Finnell serves as chairman of the authority, a consortium of public agencies managing development of a 55-mile park along the river from its outlet in Del Mar to its headwaters on Volcan Mountain near Julian.

As part of the restoration project, the river park agency is building a path and viewing platforms along the north

bank of the river as it cuts through the project area.

Finnell said Friday that after so many years, he can finally let himself believe work on the restoration project will begin.

"Short of a national emergency, I can't think of anything that's going to keep it from proceeding at this point," Finnell said.

"This has to be one of the most closely scrutinized projects in the history of mankind. There have been so many people looking at so many of the moving parts, I can't envision it won't get rolling now."

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**Web links:**

San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority

<http://www.sdrp.org/>

Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley

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