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San Dieguito Lagoon Wetlands ready to undergo major restoration

By **ERIK PISOR**, The Daily Transcript
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The San Dieguito Lagoon Wetlands, which have lost more than half of its marshes due to years of major filling activities and a year-round closure of the lagoon mouth beginning in the 1940s, are on the verge of restoration.

Following a three-year permit process and an authorization letter from the California Coastal Commission (CCC), initial work is set to begin on the restoration of the lagoon's wetlands.

Southern California Edison is restoring 150 acres of tidal wetlands within the lagoon to compensate for the loss animal and plant life attributed to the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Stations Units 2 and 3 to the north. The cost of construction is more than \$86 million.

Edison has selected Lakeside-based **Marathon Construction Corp.** as the project contractor that will excavate more than 2 million cubic yards of material to create better tidal flushing of the inlets, said Mike Furby, president of Marathon and project manager.

"This is a state-of-the-art restoration," he added, noting that this will be the company's largest mitigation project to date. "The San Dieguito restoration is unique in that it has so many sciences involved."

Joining the Marathon team will be biologists, archeologists and a paleontologist.

The project includes tidal inlet maintenance to promote regular tidal exchange through excavation of the river channel and periodic maintenance dredging, and excavation of tidal and upland areas to create subtidal and intertidal habitat. The effort is an attempt to restore the lagoon to what it was prior to 1940.

Marathon will create the wetlands through excavation of soils, which will then be used within the lagoon area to create upland disposal areas where native plants will be placed, thus attracting different varieties of bird.

"It's pretty much self-contained; it's what we call a balance site," Furby said.

Other portions of the project include creation of a salt marsh and nesting habitat, and construction of berms within the river's flow area to maintain the existing sediment flows within the river and to the beach.

The initial construction steps for the project include Marathon identifying any protected habitat, which it will shield by putting up temporary fencing and signage. The company will perform best management practices to ensure no storm water pollution during or following construction and then begin clearing the site for excavation.

Once the coastal commission awards a final coastal development permit in mid-September, excavation can begin. Until then, Marathon has a permit allowing it to haul rock to the site and clear the site for excavation, Furby said.

As construction commencement awaits the final development permit, bird season also affects start dates. The idea is to wait for bird season to end, which will allow workers to remove vacant nests, ensuring birds will not return next season when construction is ongoing.

The waiting game is something Furby is used to on this project.

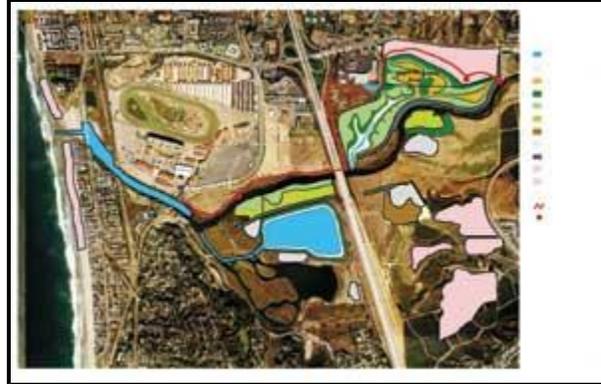
"We were under the impression we would start the project in January (of this year)," he said, adding Edison had to attain more than 20 approved permits from various agencies. The lagoons' location in both the city of San Diego and Del Mar only increased the approval process' length.

The project is anticipated to take three years, with earthwork complete in two.

Subcontractors include: San Diego-based **Recon Environmental Inc.** for habitat creation and landscaping;

Escondido-based **Ground Services Technology Inc.** for stormwater and best management practices; San Diego-based **Construction Testing & Engineers** as geotechnical engineer; **Canam Marine Enterprises Inc.** for dredging; San Diego-based **Collaborative Services** for community outreach/public relations; and Tom Demere as paleontologist. Edison hired the design firm **Project Design Consultants** to prepare final engineering designs and process the required permits.

This restoration is part of a park master plan that has been adopted for the coastal area that would also provide for public access.



Furby said eventually the project would be turned over to the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority and other agencies that will own the project and focus on public trails throughout the lagoon. The trails will be part of the Coast to Crest Trail, a 55-mile long trail that runs from the coast to Vulcan Mountain near Julian in east San Diego County.

This project is not the only restoration/mitigation project that has begun along the Southern California coastline.

In late August of this year the Bolsa Chica Lowlands Restoration Project in Huntington Beach began with the intention to restore nearly 1,257 acres of wetland ecosystem by returning tidal influence from the Pacific Ocean to nearly half of the area, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Web site.

To achieve the biological benefits of tidal restoration, a direct connection to the Pacific Ocean will be re-established through the creation of a new tidal inlet that will cut through Bolsa Chica State Beach and cross the Pacific Coast Highway near the Huntington Mesa.

The construction is anticipated to take two and a half to three years. The Pacific Coast Highway and adjacent oil field facilities will remain in operation during the entire construction period. The project will cost more than \$100 million and is funded in part by the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to make up for marine habitat destroyed during housing expansion.