

∞ Heavy equipment opens San Dieguito River at Del Mar

By: PHIL DIEHL - Staff Writer

DEL MAR ---- Excavators and front-end loaders cleared the way for the San Dieguito River to flow into the ocean Friday for the first time in several months, much to the pleasure of many Del Mar residents.

The river, stopped at the beach west of the Del Mar Fairgrounds, had grown green and stagnant. City officials and contractors decided to open it again before oxygen-depleted water could kill the fish and other marine life.

"This is the last time this river will ever be closed," said Dick Bobertz, executive director of the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority. "It's a momentous occasion from that standpoint."

The river will remain open as part of the ecological restoration of the San Dieguito Lagoon, a project discussed since the 1970s and planned for at least a decade. Work on the restoration began Sept. 11 on the eastern end of the lagoon. Completion is expected to take about three years.

Eventually, the restored lagoon will be part of a park administered by the Joint Powers Authority that will extend along the river from the beach at Del Mar more than 50 miles inland to the river's source on Volcan Mountain.

Southern California Edison will pay to restore about 150 acres of the lagoon, work estimated to cost more than \$80 million, under an agreement with the California Coastal Commission. The restoration is required to compensate for marine life killed by the cooling system at the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, which is operated by Edison.



Charlie Duckett and his friend Anthony Bernardini, both 10, stand in the middle of the rushing water of the San Dieguito River as it flows into the ocean just after work crews opened up the river's sand barrier at Dog Beach in Del Mar on Friday.

HAYNE PALMOUR IV Staff
Photographer

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The San Dieguito River begins to flow into the ocean as excavators remove a sand barrier at Dog Beach in Del Mar on Friday.

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The San Dieguito Lagoon, stifled by decades of surrounding development, will be excavated and cleared to provide a breeding ground for fish and waterfowl.

"The lagoon is where juvenile fish grow up and can be protected before they go out into the ocean," Bobertz said. It's also a nesting ground for endangered bird species such as the snowy plover and California least tern.

Edison also will pay for the work completed Friday to clear the river's mouth, officials said, though technically it is not part of the restoration.

The river has been artificially opened at least three times in the last decade. Each time it has cost as much as \$120,000, officials said, and Del Mar has shared the cost with its neighbors.

"We would go out with our hat in hand and solicited contributions from the surrounding jurisdictions," Del Mar Mayor Crystal Crawford said as she stood with a small group of people watching the excavators work.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the cities of Solana Beach and San Diego were among Del Mar's fellow contributors, she said.

The river was last opened in September 2003, and it remained open until June 14, almost three years, said Hany Elwany of the La Jolla-based firm Coastal Environments. The consulting firm is employed by the city to monitor the health of the lagoon.

Still, even with the restoration, there's no guarantee the river will stay open. The project is designed to keep the beach and lagoon as natural as possible, and there will be no rock jetties or other artificial structures to keep the river open.

"Large waves are capable of closing the lagoon," Elwany said, and when that happens, the Joint Powers Authority will send heavy equipment out to open it again.

Edison is required to pay for the maintenance of the lagoon, including keeping it open to the ocean, as long as the San Onofre power plant operates, Bobertz said.

After that, he said, money to open the lagoon will be available from an endowment funded by Edison.

Del Mar resident Lucy Zizka said she was pleased to see the water begin flowing.



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"It looks stagnant and green," she said. "It just looks awful."

Kelly Sarber, a surfer who grew up in the area, said opening the river will make the beach wider and the surf better.

"It was meant to be like this," Sarber said. "This is going to be one of the widest beaches" in San Diego County.

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