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Restoration on track for San Dieguito Lagoon

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DEL MAR – It still will be almost 20 months until the day when high tide fills San Dieguito Lagoon knee-high in water, and cord grass, fish larvae and birds begin to flourish there.

But the work to get there is well under way, with contractors having dug 400,000 cubic yards of earth west of Interstate 5 for use in contouring areas east of the freeway to shape a 440-acre expanse between Del Mar and Solana Beach.

The work is not particularly glamorous at this point, said Jon Ruth, Marathon Construction Co. project engineer. It mostly consists of “just moving dirt,” Ruth said. But it is on schedule.

“The job is moving along like everybody's hoping,” Ruth said.

Clogged by sediment from the San Dieguito River and often cut off from the Pacific tides over the years, the lagoon had degenerated in areas to a fetid place. Southern California Edison is spending \$86 million to re-create a lagoon where sea life can spawn, to compensate for loss of fish eggs and larvae at its San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, where two nuclear reactors each use about 1 billion gallons of seawater a day as a coolant.

After years of discussion and obtaining permits from various government agencies, earthwork started in October.

The 400,000 cubic yards already moved west of the freeway amount to “digging a big lake” and when finished, 1 million cubic yards will have been taken from there and used to fill in some places east of the freeway. The area to the west will be filled with water, and to the east, the southern part will be land covered with upland scrub shrub and the northern part will be wetland marsh, with water flowing and receding with the tides. A smaller area of upland sage will bound the wetland marsh to the north.

Work crews also have removed 120,000 cubic yards of top soil from the southern portion of the section east of I-5 that later will be replaced for the shrub planting.

The contractor also has begun some rudimentary work on berms along the river, Ruth said. These are



Southern California Edison is restoring the San Dieguito Lagoon to compensate for fish loss near the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

supposed to prevent silt buildup in the lagoon if a large flood occurred along the river.

The grading and contouring of the lagoon is expected to continue through 2008, and the area connecting to the river and the ocean will be dredged, too, to ensure the tidal flow, Ruth said.

Cord grass and pickleweed will be planted throughout the area in the winters of 2008-09 and 2009-10, respectively. Some seeding of the upland scrub to the east of the freeway could begin this winter in areas where contouring is finished, Ruth said.

Even with everything planted by early 2010, vegetation will be immature and likely take a few growing seasons for the mature lagoon ecosystem to emerge, Ruth said.

“Everyone here is feeling pretty good about the process,” said City Council member Jerry Finnell.

Beyond supporting the ecosystem and aquatic life, a lagoon will make the area “much more attractive” for visitors and homeowners with a view, he said.

The city's fifth annual Lagoon Day is today, a recognition approved by the City Council to acknowledge the lagoon's value. A free event is planned at the Powerhouse Community Center tonight, and students have used the celebration as an opportunity to study the lagoon.

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