

Del Mar Times

June 8 -
June 14, 2007
issue

Ahead of schedule, restoration project adds boardwalk

Nature lovers walk on a new boardwalk at the San Dieguito Lagoon. Eventually the trail will reach 55 miles to Julian.



By Laura Petersen

Many folks driving Interstate 5 from Del Mar to Solana Beach notice the dump trucks and towering piles of rock and dirt in the open valley and assume the worst.

“We still have people calling us, asking why we are building a Wal-Mart or condos out there,” said Mike Furby, president of Marathon Construction.

Actually, the project is the Wal-Mart of all environmental preservation efforts — the restoration of the San Dieguito Lagoon and 160 acres of surrounding wetlands.

The restoration is an \$86 million project funded by Southern California Edison as mitigation for environmental damage caused by their San Onofre Nuclear Generation Station. A diverse range of habitats will be revitalized, spanning from Del Mar’s Dog Beach to El Camino Real, east of Interstate 5, and from Via De la Valle to the edge of Crest Canyon.

The project began mid-September 2006 and is slated for completion late 2009. So far, the restoration is on budget and ahead of schedule, Furby said. Most of the work could be completed by the end of 2008, but will depend on permit requirements.

With a crew of 25 workers and 20 pieces of equipment working five days a week, “we’re moving dirt faster than we thought,” he said.

Much of that dirt — 800,000 cubic yards of it — is being excavated on the west side of the freeway to create a sub-tidal lagoon the size of 50 football fields. This basin will provide a critical spawning ground for fish, including the California halibut. Different types of salt marshes will be planted around the basin, providing nesting areas for endangered birds.

Birds posed the only challenge during construction. Nesting season lasts from mid-February to mid-September, and crews are not allowed to come within 200 feet of any nest. Biologists monitoring the project have observed several nests for hummingbirds, Belding savannah sparrows, killdeer, house finches and songbird sparrows.

“It’s been kind of a pain,” Furby said. “A 3 ounce hummingbird’s nest stops 80 ton trucks. We’ve had to adapt.”

Construction will begin mid-June on an 18-foot high berm that will run the length of the San Dieguito River, from the freeway to El Camino Real. The berm will stabilize the river’s course and prevent the river from flooding in heavy rain.

Over 46,000 tons of granite will armor the berm, which will primarily be constructed of geogrid engineered material and dirt. The granite was cut from a gorge to make way for the State Route-125 addition in Otay Mesa — a lucky coincidence because no quarry in San Diego would be able to provide that much rock.

The berm should be completed before the start of the rainy season in November. However, first, a 69,000-volt power line must be relocated from the wetlands to Via de la Valle.

Finally, low, mid and high marshes will be restored on the north side of the river, by dispersing nutrient-rich top-soil salvaged from the excavation sites and planting pickleweed, cordgrass and other coastal scrub plants.

The public can observe the restoration in action and existing wildlife from a recently constructed boardwalk accessible from Jimmy Durante Boulevard.

The 1,200-foot boardwalk is part of the Coast to Crest trail, which will someday span the 55 miles from the Del Mar coastline to the origins of the San Dieguito River’s source on Volcan Mountain, near Julian.

The Del Mar Rotary Club built the boardwalk in one day, and celebrated it’s grand opening June 2.

“Everyone said it was the best work project we’ve ever done,” said past Rotarian president Bob Fuchs. “When it is finally done, the park will have tremendous regional significance.”

The area immediately adjacent to the boardwalk is still an old dirt parking lot, but come September, it will be transformed into a vibrant ecosystem. However, visitors can still view birds and fish, and read informational signs along the boardwalk.

“You will see all the wildlife out there that you don’t see when you go by everyday on I-5,” said Dick Bobertz, executive director of the San Dieguito River Park. “You can sit at the viewing platform and it won’t be long before you see mullet, 12 to 18 inches long, jumping a couple feet out of the water. In the morning there are so many out of the water it’s almost startling.”

Planks are for sale to raise funds to finish the 2-mile, wheelchair accessible, dirt trail that will run from the boardwalk along the edge of the restoration project. For \$100, an engraved plaque will be installed on a boardwalk plank.

To purchase a plank, go to the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy website www.sdrvc.org or call (858) 755-6956. For more information on the restoration project, go to www.sdlagoon.com.