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An artist's rendering of the completed San Dieguito Wetlands project.

Paradise Preserved

IF YOU'RE ONE OF THE HUNDREDS of thousands who commute between San Diego and North County daily, you've likely noticed major construction activity on both sides of the Interstate 5 stretch through Del Mar, near Via de la Valle. (If you *haven't* noticed, it's time to put down that BlackBerry/Treo/cell phone.) You can almost hear San Diegans' collective sigh: *More* development of coastal North County's already shrinking open space?

In fact, the opposite is taking place: The San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration project will produce 160 acres of new wetlands, increase the diversity of the existing habitat and establish an expansive nature preserve for endangered wildlife. The \$86 million project, financed by Southern California Edison, encompasses 440 acres and entails the excavation of more than 2 million cubic yards of sediment to create space for flowing tidewaters and salt marshes and to increase fish and bird populations. It also calls for the construction of 8,000 lineal feet of berms

to channel water to and from the ocean and protect the wetlands.

The restoration team—a small army of archaeologists, paleontologists, biologists, engineers, geologists and construction workers—has been working around a major freeway, railroad tracks, bridges and the Del Mar Racetrack to restore the region's fragile ecosystem.

Southern California Edison project manager Samir Tanious has been involved since the inception 15 years ago. He's ushered the restoration effort through environmental impact studies, design and engineering phases, an extensive permitting process (involving a half-dozen agencies) and now, construction.

"It's going to be the jewel of the region," says Tanious. "If you compare how many people visit the Grand Canyon each year [about 5 million] with the number of people who pass through this preserve [an estimated 91 million], it's massive."

When completed in late 2009, the preserve will include the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority's trail system, a boardwalk, three viewing platforms and a visitor center. "It will be a great opportunity for the public to walk around the wetlands and explore all the habitats that have been restored," says Tanious.

Southern California Edison undertook the project with the city of Del Mar and the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority to compensate for the loss of fish life attributed to the San Onofre power plant 33 miles north. SCE is obligated to maintain the wetland for the operating life of the plant, or until 2050. More info: sdlagoon.com.

