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For river
recovery, a gentle
rain would sure
be nice

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RANCHO SANTA FE -- The San Dieguito River Valley, badly charred during last month's wildfires, is at the mercy of Mother Nature when it comes to the speed of its recovery, environmental experts say.

About 62 percent of the San Dieguito River Valley, which starts near Julian and empties into the Pacific Ocean in Del Mar, was burned during last month's wildfires.

JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE Staff Photo

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A season of heavy rain could cause more damage to the waterway, filling it with soot and killing fish and other aquatic animals that live there, experts say. However, a season of light rain could help the river rebound.

"A kind of soft rain, it really helps establish plant regrowth," said Ben Neill, a water resource control engineer for the county's Regional Water Quality Control Board. "We saw that happen in 2003 with the Cedar fire."

The National Weather Service is predicting a mild rainy season, forecaster Philip Gonsalves said Tuesday. In fact, a drizzle is expected to begin falling Thursday night and continue into Friday.

Wending its way from Vulcan Mountain near Julian and emptying into the Pacific Ocean in Del Mar, the San Dieguito River saw more than its share of fire this October. Roughly 62 percent of its 74,000 acres were scorched when the Witch Creek fire rushed west toward the coast.

The river is home to 23 environmentally sensitive plant species and 55 environmentally sensitive animal species, according to a planning document for the San Dieguito River Park, which includes most of the river valley.

After last month's fires, even in areas where the landscape was blackened, new life is waiting to emerge. Tim Dillingham, a biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game, said that a slow soak would help sprout seeds released by burned plants along the river corridor.

"Usually, if the fire stays under 2,000 degrees, the seeds will survive, and it looks like that's what we've seen out there for the most part," Dillingham said. "If we can get some plants growing on the hillsides, then we should have a lot less erosion. Four or five days of gentle rain would be about perfect."

As it moves from the inland mountains to the Pacific Ocean, the San Dieguito passes through wetlands near the Del Mar Fairgrounds. Those wetlands are undergoing an \$86 million restoration project paid for by Southern California Edison Co. as compensation for ocean life killed over the years by the cooling system of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

Project Manager Samir Tanious, who works for Southern California Edison Co., said he has not yet begun to see any ash or

soot in the water that is entering the work site.

He said the estuary's new design includes berms along both sides of the river almost all the way to the beach. That design, he said, would likely convey dirty water directly to the ocean if a heavy storm hits this winter.

"I think the design of the project takes into account this kind of event," Tanious said.

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