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San Dieguito wetlands project hits midway point
By: PAUL SISSON - Staff Writer
Work stops occasionally for birds but remains on schedule

DEL MAR -- On the wing, a hummingbird stands little chance of stopping a dump truck. But put that same bird in a nest, and even the largest earthmover must pause.

Such was the case for the San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration project, a biologist said Wednesday. Work stopped repeatedly this summer as biologists spotted nesting birds, including an Anna's hummingbird that built a nest 10 feet from the expansive project's haul route just east of Interstate 5.

Project bird biologist Kimberly Bender said the hummingbird sighting briefly stopped all dump trucks from passing under I-5.

"We monitored the bird every five minutes for two days, and we weren't seeing any negative effects," said Bender, who works for Southern California Edison, the utility company paying for the $86 million restoration project.

Project managers, who met with members of the public Wednesday at Del Mar's Powerhouse Community Center, said endangered, protected or migratory birds stopped construction several times in the first 15 months of the project, but have not set back the overall construction schedule.

"We are on schedule," said Edison project manager Samir Tanious. "We can finish in 2009."

To make up for the negative effects of its San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station near San Clemente, which sucks 2.5 billion gallons of cooling water from the Pacific each day, Edison must create or restore at least 150 acres of wetlands at the mouth of the San Dieguito River.

When the project is complete, it will include a 12-foot-deep, 42-acre fish hatchery, five bird-nesting areas and a half-dozen species of native plants, including pickleweed and cordgrass.

Mike Furby, president of Marathon Construction, which is rebuilding the lagoon for Edison, said 70 percent of the project's 2 million cubic yards of soil and sand has been excavated. He said dirt moving should be complete by July, plant seeding should be finished by December 2008, and dredging of the main river channel ---- the last step before completion ---- will be done in February 2009.

"The bottom line is this is going to be a beautiful park," Furby said.

Because the land surrounding the river is home to many coastal birds, the work plan for moving so much soil is designed to avoid nesting sites.

Bender said the hummingbird near the I-5 bridge over the river was found to be tolerant of construction noise.

"It decided to make a nest right next to the freeway, so it seemed comfortable with the noise," she said. "We were able to let them (equipment operators) run full speed."

Killdeer, a species of a medium-sized brown-and-white shore bird, also stopped construction after nesting briefly in a section of recently installed rock riprap that protects 8,000 linear feet of berms being built along the edge of the river to protect reconstructed nesting areas.

Project engineer John Ruth said excavators found four storage tanks, three which held diesel fuel and a fourth that held fresh water. He said the fuel tanks had leaked into the sandy soil, requiring workers to remove all of the nearby dirt.

"We kept digging until the samples came back clean," Ruth said.

Jacqueline Winterer, president of Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley, attended Wednesday's presentation and said she was pleased with how the project has unfolded.

"They are very good, but also very lucky," Winterer said. "We haven't had any rain, but if we did, the whole area would be flooded, and they wouldn't be able to do anything."

-- Contact staff writer Paul Sisson at (760) 901-4087 or psisson@nctimes.com.