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## Tidal basin opens to ocean

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DEL MAR – The San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project passed a milestone yesterday, when a newly dredged basin – once a World War II-era Navy dirigible landing field – was opened to the ocean's nurturing tides.

The 40-acre tidal basin is a key element of the 440-acre restoration project because it is expected to become a thriving habitat for fish such as halibut, grunion and bass.

"It's one of the most visual aspects of the job," said Mike Furby, president of Marathon Construction Corp.

Southern California Edison is paying for the \$86 million effort to repair and revitalize the San Dieguito Lagoon after a century of development – roads, bridges, the Del Mar Fairgrounds and the airfield – had encroached on the waterway.

The California Coastal Commission required Edison to pay for the work in return for the environmental damage caused by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station it operates in North County.

Crews began the wetlands restoration project in 2006 and expect to complete it in 2009. Of the lagoon's 440 acres, which spread from the Del Mar beach to El Camino Real east of the fairgrounds, about 160 acres will be new or restored wetlands.

While the region's coastal lagoons serve as fish hatcheries, they also are along the Pacific Flyway bird-migration route. So, as part of the project, five nesting sites are designed to attract endangered California least terns and Belding's Savannah sparrows.

The restoration project involves excavating about two million cubic yards of dirt, and about half of that was moved to create the tidal basin that opened yesterday.

The basin, just west of Interstate 5 and southeast of the fairgrounds, had been kept closed with an earthen dam. Opening that dam yesterday connected the basin for the first time to the San Dieguito River, which flows northwest to the ocean.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS / Union-Tribune  
Works crews removed the earthen dam at the mouth of the tidal basin yesterday, which then was connected to a channel of the San Dieguito River, which flows northwest to the ocean.

Edison is obligated to keep the river mouth near the ocean open in perpetuity. That will require excavating about 80,000 cubic yards of dirt from the river during the first dredging, said Furby, president of the contractor that Edison hired to do the restoration.

Marathon plans to begin dredging the river in February 2009, Furby said.

Yesterday, a few dozen officials and members of the media watched as an excavator, with a crane and bucket, scooped dirt from the dam and swung it into a dump truck.

Once the dam was removed, water spilled over into the tidal basin, creating a plume that gradually spread over much of the water's surface.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS / Union-Tribune  
A newly dredged tidal basin, which once was a Navy dirigible landing field, was connected to an ocean-going river channel – a key advance in the San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project under way on both sides of I-5 near the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

Until now, very little, except some algae, has lived in the recently excavated tidal basin, said Steve Schroeter, a marine biologist with UC Santa Barbara, who is working on the project for the Coastal Commission.

“It's going to be very interesting to follow the colonization of this habitat,” he said.

Schroeter said fish could arrive in the basin within a year. Invertebrates such as clams and snails could take longer to populate the habitat. He estimates the tidal basin's wildlife population could be comparable to other lagoon environments in four to five years.

He said the Coastal Commission has a monitoring plan for the whole 440 acres to assess how the completed restoration project compares with other wetlands, such as the Tijuana Estuary.

“There's going to be a lot more tidal habitat probably than there was historically,” Schroeter said. “If anything, it might be an improvement.”

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