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SAN DIEGUITO WETLANDS PROJECT IS OPEN TO THE OCEAN ONCE AGAIN



The last piles of earth were scooped out of the way allowing the Pacific Ocean to flow into the new, large lagoon in the San Dieguito wetlands restoration project, marking a critical milestone for the \$86-million project.

'Big Moment' for lagoon

By Laura Petersen

The San Dieguito wetlands restoration project made history Jan. 23 as 80 million gallons of invigorating ocean water flowed into the sensitive habitat for the first time since the early 1900s.

"It's a big moment in the life of a lagoon," said Dick Bobertz, executive director of the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority.

As the area where fresh-water rivers mingle with the salty ocean, lagoons provide a critical spawning ground for fish such as the California halibut. Degraded as swamps in the past, 95 percent of the state's wetlands have been paved over with development and highways.

San Dieguito Lagoon was no exception with the installation of the Del Mar Fairgrounds in the 1930s and the nearby airstrip, which was used for blimps, during World War II.

What remained of the lagoon, just south of the fairgrounds, suffered as sand regularly choked the river mouth where the San Dieguito River meets the ocean at Dog Beach. Inland development, including the damming of Lake Hodges, severely cut water flow from the other end.

"Almost a century of heavy impacts steadily decreased the lagoon's ability to do what it's suppose to do," said Leslie Wollenweber, resource specialist for the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy. "This is a giant step to get back a small piece of it."

The \$86-million restoration of the lagoon and 150 acres of surrounding wetlands is 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 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 in mid-September 2006 and is slated for completion late 2009.

The site of the old airstrip is now a key element of the project, a 40-acre sub-tidal basin.

It took 15 months to excavate 850,000 cubic yards of material to create the 16-foot deep hole the size of 40 football fields. Already filled with groundwater, the basin was connected to tidal flow when the last large piles of sludge were scooped out of the way.

The high tide began rushing in, bringing fresh, oxygenated water and fish. After the water from the basin flushed out with the receding tide a few hours later, the critical process of tidal exchange was complete.

"This is the start of the operation of the wetland restoration," said Jacqueline Winterer, president of the Friends of San Dieguito River Park. "This is the beginning."

The subtidal lagoon was completed just in time for nesting season, which commences in February. Sandy nesting sites have been created on both sides to attract the least tern and snowy plover.

The next phase of the project is revegetation around the basin and throughout the project area to create different types of salt marshes. In March, 50,000 small containers of native pickleweed will be planted in a test site in the low and mid marsh areas north of the newly formed lagoon. Pickleweed is the preferred home of the belding Savannah sparrow and clapper rail.

The Grand Avenue Bridge, which used to connect to the airstrip, will be transformed into a viewing platform. Visitors can observe the natural habitat from here or from the recently installed boardwalk off Jimmy Durante Boulevard.

The final step of the project will be dredging the lagoon's inlet to make it deeper, so it will not so easily fill with sand and block tidal flushing.

It will take two to five years for the wetlands to fully take root and flourish, said Samir Taniou, project manager for Southern California Edison.

The many wetland advocates are eager for that day, but they are well practiced in patience — this project has been decades in the making.

Supervisor Pam Slater-Price has advocated for the project from day one, guiding it through several administrations. Edison considered doing several smaller projects, rather than one very large, very expensive one that requires long-term participation (they must keep the lagoon inlet open for perpetuity).

"This had to be the project," Slater-Price said. "It was important to keep the money local because the impact was local."

The lagoon holds special distinction as the western gateway to the larger San Dieguito River Valley Park, and was in fact the igniting element for citizen efforts to preserve the open space. The park spans 55 miles from the ocean to the river's origins on Volcan Mountain.

The restoration of the sensitive and endangered wetland habitat is a crowning addition to the park. Bobertz, the park's executive director, commended contractor Marathon Construction for the physical implementation of this dream-come-true:

"Everyone has agreed they're doing a first class, professional job that we can all be proud of forever.