

Nursery growing seedlings for wetlands

Habitat restoration company's specialty

By Adam Kaye
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NESTOR – Don't expect to find these plants at your neighborhood nursery.

Pickleweed, cord grass, alkali heath, jaumea – by their common names, these plants are native to Southern California's shrinking coastal wetlands. They aren't exactly common, though, and neither is the job of nurturing and planting 350,000 seedlings.

That work falls to RECON Native Plants Inc., which is growing the seedlings at its nursery in Nestor for the massive San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project in Del Mar.

The three-year restoration includes creating a network of lagoons and channels on 440 acres in the San Dieguito River Valley near the Del Mar Fairgrounds. Most of the area requires revegetation.

The trickiest places to plant are 35 acres of riverbank and tidal basins that are considered coastal salt marsh, a landscape blanketed by low-growing plants.

The most common plant there is pickleweed, a fleshy-leafed ground cover frequented by the Belding's savannah sparrow.

One plant that grows right at the water's edge, and provides safe harbor for the endangered light-footed clapper rail, is cord grass. RECON is nurturing the first commercially produced crop of the rare plant with seeds harvested from the Tijuana River estuary.

"You'll definitely not find any of these at Home Depot," said Peter Tomsovic of RECON Native Plants. The nursery is a division of RECON Environmental Inc., a San Diego consulting firm that specializes in habitat restoration.

RECON has a \$1.8 million contract as part of the \$86 million wetlands restoration project paid for by



NELVIN CEPEDA / Union-Tribune

General manager Ryan West of RECON Native Plants checks a tray of cord grass at the nursery in Nestor. The company is growing seedlings for the massive San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project in Del Mar. The three-year restoration includes creating a network of lagoons and channels on 440 acres in the the San Dieguito River Valley near the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

Southern California Edison to compensate for marine life killed by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

While the Edison contract is one of the most lucrative secured by RECON, the company has planted larger areas, Tomsovic said.

At its offices in downtown San Diego, RECON also provides consulting for government agencies and employs biologists, archaeologists and other specialists on a staff of 100, Tomsovic said.

Bigger restoration jobs, such as the one for Pardee, require an on-site nursery. Seedlings for the San Dieguito project, however, are growing at Recon's nursery on Saturn Boulevard, near the Tijuana River.

General manager Ryan West is growing from seed the finicky plants used to landscape the lowest sections of the San Dieguito wetlands, where the slightest elevation gradients can determine whether plants will thrive. Some plants need daily inundations from the tides and will suffer without them.

Next month, workers will test-plant 3 acres south of the San Dieguito River and west of the freeway. The rest of the planting is scheduled for next fall.

At the Nestor nursery, thousands of cord-grass seedlings have germinated. They will grow to 3 feet in height, but today the seedlings stand less than an inch tall and are as thin as a horse's hair.

In November, seed collectors took scythes to the nearby Tijuana River estuary to reap cord-grass seeds. They worked with the permission of wildlife agencies, West said.

Roots don't emerge from a cord-grass seed until about a month after germination, which allows the seeds to remain buoyant and disseminate as the intertidal marsh ebbs and flows, West said.

The black soil filling the cord-grass flats is no off-the-shelf potting mix. Months ago, dump trucks hauled topsoil from the restoration project in Del Mar to the Nestor nursery to use as a growing medium.

Native plants have unique associations with native soil, which contains micronutrients that fortify the seedlings, Tomsovic said.

At the project site, topsoil is stored in great heaps. After earthmoving machines sculpt the basins and berms, the final step is to cap the contours with a coat of the topsoil.

One foot of elevation can decide whether a certain species lives or dies. For that reason, grading equipment is fitted with satellite-based surveying instruments to cut basins and embankments to exact specifications.

About one-third of the project area is considered an "upland" habitat, which takes an entirely different palette of plants from that of the salt marsh. Last month, workers mechanically seeded the upland areas with a blend of native grasses and other plants, said Samir Tanious, project manager. The seed mix was gathered from within a 30-mile radius of the San Dieguito River Valley and was subject to regulatory agencies' approval, he said.

Closer to the water, RECON's crews next fall will pop seedlings from 2-inch pots every 2 feet throughout the 35-acre salt marsh, Tomsovic said. Nearly 95 percent of the specimens will be pickleweed.

Unlike the non-native ice plant often seen along freeway embankments, which people sometimes refer to as pickleweed, the kind RECON will plant is native to the wetland.

Tomsovic said workers will put a variety of native plants on the site and will monitor which ones become established first.

“There's no textbook on how to grow these plants,” Tomsovic said. “We do a lot of experimentation.”

■Adam Kaye is a freelance writer in Del Mar.

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