

Area lagoons get their annual unclogging

By Adam Kaye
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Call it spring cleaning for lagoons.

The mop and bucket, so to speak, are excavators and dump trucks. Heavy equipment is at work unplugging the mouths of San Dieguito and Los Peñasquitos lagoons near Del Mar, which closed six weeks ago after winter surf and currents blocked the openings with sand and cobbles. Adding to the blockage is sediment that washes toward the ocean from upstream.

The lumbering machines finished their annual job at San Elijo Lagoon in southern Encinitas earlier this week.

The equipment then traveled to Torrey Pines State Beach, the outlet for Los Peñasquitos Lagoon, where dredging began yesterday.

Different agencies are responsible for opening the mouths at each lagoon, but all use heavy equipment operator Roberts Engineering to do the work.

At Los Peñasquitos yesterday, workers began by cutting a narrow groove from the lagoon to the ocean to drain enough water so the equipment could drive safely back and forth under the Coast Highway bridge.

Then the serious excavation began, with dump truck after dump truck hauling soggy sand out of the river channel to offload on adjoining beaches.

All this lasts about a week, and after 25 years of doing it, the drill has become routine.

“We pretty much have this figured out,” said Mike Hastings, executive director of the Los Peñasquitos Lagoon Foundation as he watched the work.

At the San Dieguito River and lagoon near the Del Mar Racetrack, a massive wetlands restoration project is under way that includes dredging the outlet to the ocean. A project planner said the outlet should be open by Tuesday or Wednesday.

Meanwhile, much of the nearby North Beach in Del Mar – where dog owners can take their pets for off-leash romps – is off-limits during work hours.



JOHN GIBBONS / Union-Tribune
Heavy equipment works unplugging the mouths of San Dieguito and Los Peñasquitos lagoons near Del Mar, which closed six weeks ago after winter surf and currents blocked the openings with sand and cobbles.

The outlets of the three coastal lagoons become plugged because they are crisscrossed by highways and a railroad.

“They are tiny lagoons,” said scientist Hany Elwany, whose La Jolla-based company, Coastal Environments, provides consulting for lagoon managers. “Because they are small, they cannot flush the sediment that is trapped inside. They need help from time to time.”

Tidal flushing keeps the little lagoons healthy. If they are left to stagnate, oxygen levels decline, algae blooms and many fish die. Hot weather exacerbates the problem.

Big surf on March 16 plugged the lagoon mouths and none of them had been able to maintain an opening since then, Elwany said.

Farther north, the health of coastal lagoons also relies on human intervention.

Breakwaters at Batiquitos and Agua Hedionda lagoons in Carlsbad keep the channels permanently open. Dredging equipment removes buildup periodically from within the blue basins.

Buena Vista Lagoon, between Oceanside and Carlsbad, contains fresh water and a weir prevents inundation from the sea.

In addition to heavy digging, the dredging of lagoon channels involves plenty of bureaucracy – and money.

The openings cost at least \$100,000 but provide the benefit of valuable sand that is spread on nearby beaches.

San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy maintains an endowment to finance its annual dredging; Southern California Edison pays for current and future dredging at San Dieguito to compensate for marine life killed by San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station; the California Coastal Conservancy recently approved \$297,000 for dredging at Los Peñasquitos through 2011. The grant is administered by the Los Peñasquitos Lagoon Foundation.

The lagoons need a good cleaning at least once a year, Elwany said.

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