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Man-made lagoon connected to sea

By: ADAM KAYE - Staff Writer

With berm removal, fish can spawn in basin

DEL MAR -- Workers opened a channel on Wednesday that connects a vast, man-made lagoon to the sea.

If all goes as planned, the 45-acre basin, just west of Interstate 5, will become a thriving location for fish to spawn and birds and other wildlife to visit, project planners said.

The basin is the centerpiece of the \$86 million San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project. Southern California Edison, the majority owner of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, is paying for the three-year, 440-acre project to compensate for fish killed by the power plant's cooling system.

An expansive addition to San Dieguito Lagoon, the basin took nearly one year to dig but only minutes to open.

About two dozen people, including contractors, consultants and government representatives, cheered as an excavator scooped away a narrow berm separating the basin from a channel connecting to the San Dieguito River and the ocean.

"This is a major milestone for the project," said Samir Tanious, a project manager for Edison.

"Connecting the new lagoon to the ocean means that we have introduced the first major environmental piece of the puzzle to create breeding habitat for fish, which will attract wildlife and other endangered species to the region," he added.

The restoration project -- and the plants and wildlife it is designed to bring -- is at the west end of the San Dieguito River Park, which runs for nearly 55 miles from the beach at Del Mar to the river's headwaters on Volcan Mountain, near Julian.

Daily ebbs and flows of the tides will empty and fill the newly opened basin with seawater and such fish species as bass, halibut, mullet and smelt, officials said.

Bill Michalsky was one of many onlookers Wednesday who said the project -- and the utility's 40-year obligation to maintain it -- would keep the fragile lagoon healthy.

Michalsky is a member of Del Mar's San Dieguito Lagoon Committee that advises the City Council on matters related to the lagoon and the restoration project.

"What a beautiful place," he said.

The restoration project, he said, would add to the beauty of the river valley on both sides of Interstate 5, where heavy equipment sculpted the landscape into an array of berms, channels and basins.

Elevation control is critical for the project to succeed, planners say. That's why the blades of grading equipment are fitted with transmitters connected to satellite surveying devices.

The transmitters enable equipment operators to carve the land within inches of specifications.

Wetland plants grow at specific elevations, and 12 inches can determine whether desired or unwanted species flourish. Some plants are adapted to make contact with the water frequently while others prefer less inundation.

"This is something west of Interstate 5 that coastal residents can appreciate," said county Supervisor Pam Slater-Price, a Del Mar resident and a longtime lagoon backer.

Dick Bobertz, executive director of the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority, echoed her enthusiasm.

In addition to restoration work paid for by Edison, Bobertz said he hopes that the state Department of Transportation would consider the river valley as a place to perform "mitigation" to compensate for environmental damage caused by the planned expansion of Interstate 5.

He said he also hopes Poseidon Resources Inc., a private company planning to open a desalination plant Carlsbad, would consider performing restoration work within the river park.

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An excavator clears away a berm so that ocean water can flow into a man-made basin within the San Dieguito Lagoon in Del Mar on Wednesday.

HAYNE PALMOUR IV Staff Photographer