

Last modified Wednesday, December 3, 2008 6:08 PM PST



A crowd watches as a backhoe removes dirt from an earthen dam, allowing ocean water to flow for the first time into the Marine Wildlife Sanctuary portion of wetlands near the San Dieguito River, east of Del Mar, on Wednesday. (Photo by Hayne Palmour IV - staff photographer)

DEL MAR: Lagoon basin opened to tidal flow

By RUTH MARVIN WEBSTER - for the North County Times

DEL MAR ---- To commuters traveling on Interstate 5, it may not have looked like much ---- just a single bulldozer clawing away dirt from the edge a channel of the San Dieguito River, east of the freeway.

But to San Diego County Supervisor Pam Slater-Price and others who were at a Wednesday afternoon ceremony to commemorate the opening of a newly dredged 75-acre basin to tidal waters, it was a major milestone.

"This marks the culmination of 20 years of work," said Slater-Price, who was also on hand in January when workers opened the San Dieguito river channel to a 40-acre basin west of the freeway. Fish and wildlife have already begun to populate that area.

"Today, we open nearly double what we did eight months ago, and that is incredible in today's world, especially in this urban environment," Slater-Price said at Wednesday's gathering.

"All you have to do is give (native species) a chance," she added after the ceremony. "This is like a rebirth of the lagoon."

In 2006, Southern California Edison began dredging 440-acres near Del Mar as part of a \$90 million project restore the wetlands to their natural state. The restoration project was partial compensation for environmental damage caused by Edison's San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant.

Crews also recently completed a 175-acre artificial giant kelp reef north of San Diego County as part of that mitigation.

Once the huge easterly basin that opened Wednesday is filled with tidal waters, workers will begin dredging the river channel near the ocean and open the tidal inlet.

After that, the now barren wetland areas will be vegetated with 350,000 plants that will in serve as a hatchery for such saltwater fish as top smelt, grunion, mullet and gobies.

"We have to get that flushing action going before we can start to replant," said Gordon Lutes, senior vice president of Project Design Consultants, one of civil engineering firm working on the project. "But this is another missing piece completed."

Marine biologists also believe the wetlands restoration will attract birds like the California Brown Pelican and the California Least Tern and animals such as the Pacific Little Pocket Mouse.

"It is so exciting to see this project move forward," said Carolyn Lieberman, coastal program coordinator for the US Department of Fish and Wildlife. "This is really a big step in reversing the losses in coastal tidal wetlands as it will provide important habitat for fish and other animals."

The massive \$90 million restoration project is expected to be finished in 2010 with 55 miles of hiking trails completed in the next few months and replanting to begin in about a year.