

Opening of berm completes restoration

Expert: Re-creation of marsh near river to change ecosystem

By Michael Burge

STAFF WRITER

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DEL MAR – At the push of a lever, a steam shovel lifted a scoop of dirt and opened a channel yesterday between an earthen basin and the San Dieguito River, letting river water flow in.

Before the day was out, the water had filled two basins scraped out of the ground, creating a 75-acre marsh and a new home for fish, birds and plants.

The breaking of the berm yesterday re-creates a tidal marsh like those that existed before homes, shopping centers, farms and a fairgrounds sprung up decades ago, and it marks a new chapter in the life of the San Dieguito River Valley.

“Opening up this area is going to reverse the historic loss we've had of tidal wetlands,” said Carolyn Lieberman, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

She said water birds will nest in the new marsh and feed on the tiny fish that enter, developing a new ecosystem. Many of those fish will grow to adults and swim back out to the river.

The work is part of a massive \$86 million restoration project being funded by Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric Co. to make up for environmental damage caused by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station in North County. Edison owns about 80 percent of the plant and SDG&E 20 percent.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
An excavator removed a piece of an earthen dam yesterday morning, which allowed water to flow into a newly restored marsh near the San Dieguito River.

For more than two years, giant excavators and dump trucks have crisscrossed 440 acres of ground on both sides of Interstate 5 near the Del Mar Fairgrounds, shaping what looked like the largest dirt parking lot north of Mexico.

“All this area here – 75 acres total – we’ve excavated it and sculpted the basin to have a natural-looking wetland shape,” said David Kay, manager of environmental projects for Southern California Edison, the lead on the project.

The marsh was dug at a precise elevation to let river water in and out as the tide rises and falls twice a day.

When the tide recedes and the water flows out, it will leave behind pools of water brimming with fish, larvae and seeds – bits of life and nutrients.

Kay said the marsh is part of a complex of water basins and nesting sites that will endure “from now until forever.”

The restoration created 150 acres of wetland within the 440 acres.

“It’s not often a mitigation project has this much physical and visual impact on the community,” said Erbin Keith, a vice president with Sempra Energy, SDG&E’s parent company.

County Supervisor Pam Slater-Price said the project is a gain for San Diego County, noting that it adds acreage and trails to the San Dieguito River Park, which stretches from the ocean to Julian.

Before the day was out, the dirt berm separating the empty basin and the river was gone, and water flowed through the new 60-foot gap, connecting the marsh with the river and Pacific Ocean barely a mile away.

One form of life that will vanish from the wetland are the growling excavators that made it possible.

Mike Furby, president of Marathon Construction, the contractor, said the behemoths will all be gone in about three weeks.

Then 400,000 plants native to the marsh and lagoon area will be planted, Furby said.

The wetlands project and a \$46 million artificial kelp reef dedicated off San Clemente last month were required by the California Coastal Commission to compensate for marine life destroyed by the San Onofre power station. The projects have been in the works since the mid-1970s.



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■Michael Burge: (760) 476-8230; michael.burge@uniontrib.com