

DEL MAR TIMES

Wetlands milestone marked

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By Laura Petersen

Ocean water rushes into new marshland

The San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project celebrated a major milestone when another 60 acres of new marshland were opened to the ocean on Dec. 3.

The 168-acre project is now two-thirds done, and the final components are expected to be completed by the end of 2009.

The \$86-million restoration project began in December 2006 and is funded by Southern California Edison as mitigation for environmental damage caused by their San Onofre Nuclear Generation Station.

Project participants, elected officials and environmentalists gathered to watch bulldozers scoop away the last clumps of earth separating the newly constructed salt marsh basin from the San Dieguito River.

In her opening remarks, Supervisor Pam Slater-Price emphasized the significance of the day.

"This is a combination of 20 years of work, effort and everyone pulling for this project," Slater-Price said. "168 acres of wetland is unbelievable in today's world."

High hopes

It took a year to excavate 1.1 million cubic yards of dirt east of Interstate 5 to create the large salt marsh habitat, which will support fish, invertebrates and endangered birds such as the snowy plover and Belding's savannah sparrow.

Unlike the lagoon created west of the freeway, this marsh will not always be filled with water. The basin is shallower and at a higher elevation, so mudflats will be exposed at low tides, coastal engineer Hany Elwany said.

Project designers are hopeful this habitat will be just as successful as the sub-tidal lagoon west of the freeway, which experienced an explosion of life in just nine months after it was connected to the ocean in January.

In the coming year, more than 400,000 plants will be planted throughout the restoration site. The final step will be dredging the lagoon inlet so ocean water can easier enter and exit the lagoon wetland system.

Trail progress

Progress is also being made on the Coast to Crest Trail, which will run along the edge of the restoration project and when complete, connect the entire river valley from the river's origins on Vulcan Mountain to where it meets the ocean at Dog Beach in Del Mar.

The San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy recently completed a .65-mile segment of the trail from San Andres Drive along the edge of the newly constructed salt marsh. Two footbridges were installed on either side of the freeway, so pedestrians can safely cross underneath to continue along the north river bank.

The excavated dirt from the new salt marsh was used to build a massive berm along Via de la Valle from San Andres to Del Mar Horsepark. The next phase of the Coast to Crest Trail will be constructed along this berm overlooking the newly restored wetlands.



Supervisor Pam Slater-Price (center) applauded the hard work that culminated in the opening of another restored portion of the San Dieguito Wetlands.

Photo by: Laura Petersen

The Conservancy is soliciting donations to help build this trail segment. The nonprofit received a \$15,000 donation to jumpstart fundraising efforts and plans to raise a matching amount, Executive Director Dick Bobertz said.

For more information, go to sdrvc.org.

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