

Renewed lagoon: Workers moving tons of sand to open inlet to wetlands

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Construction crews are removing sand to open the mouth of San Dieguito Lagoon in Del Mar. — Peggy Peattie

DEL MAR — Remember, as a child, how hard it was to dig a river at the beach?

Well, it's seemingly much easier with large construction equipment.

Case in point, Del Mar's Dog Beach, where crews are transporting 55,000 cubic yards of sand over the next month to create a new inlet for the San Dieguito River.

The process is impossible to miss.

The southern portion of the beach, on Coast Highway 101 just south of Via de la Valle, is dominated by bulldozers, excavators and trucks. The new river mouth will direct 80 million gallons of rich seawater to the San Dieguito Lagoon and wetlands during high tides to feed fish, bird and plant populations. The lagoon is southeast of the Del Mar Fairgrounds, three-quarters of a mile from the inlet. The wetlands extend more than a mile east of Interstate 5.

The work is the last part of a \$90 million joint project between Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric to bring the lagoon back to its natural state. Construction began Sept. 6 and is expected to be completed in early October.

The California Coastal Commission required Edison and SDG&E to restore 150 acres of sensitive wetlands to lessen the harm done by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, which they co-own. A study found the power plant sucked in 621 tons of fish in 2009.

The commission approved San Dieguito Lagoon as the site to be restored in 1997.

The project began in 2006 after a lengthy permitting process. Crews quickly realized they had their work cut out for them. They started by removing infrastructure left from when the lagoon was paved over with an airstrip used by the Navy during World War II and later by celebrities attending horse races. Workers had to remove buried fuel tanks and even searched for land mines. Joe Ellis, construction superintendent, said they found no explosives.

Still, the work was not exactly conducive to bringing in budding fish, plant and bird populations, like there was predevelopment. To get them back, tidal flow from the Pacific Ocean needed to reach the wetlands. By 2008, the new 42-acre lagoon was ready to open.

Kelly Sarber, a project spokeswoman, said researchers counted 12 million baby fish living in the San Dieguito Lagoon seven months later. Bird species have tripled since 2006, and now five nesting sites exist for the endangered California least tern, Sarber said.

“We took what was a degraded, man-made dirt field and ingratiated it with water and plants so that it became a natural ecosystem,” she said. “At some point, it’s not man-made anymore; it’s a natural system.”

There was still work to be done. The inlet on Dog Beach would clog with sand, so it was impossible to ensure ocean nutrients could reach the center of the lagoon in perpetuity. It backed up largely because it bordered rocks that protected the homes above, giving the excess sand no place to go.

That shouldn’t happen easily with the new inlet — 60 feet wide, 2 to 6 feet deep, and strategically placed 150 feet north in the middle of Dog Beach. The hauled-out sand will be used for beach replenishment on Del Mar beaches to the south.

While the hard labor is concluding, Edison and SDG&E are required to maintain the overall lagoon for several years. If the new inlet clogs, for instance, the utility companies have to reopen it.

Most of Dog Beach remains open through construction, which doesn’t seem to faze canines. Steve Suffecool, of Tucson, visited recently with his wife, Roxanne, and Mia, his 2-year-old Labrador retriever. Suffecool said he didn’t notice any hesitation in his four-legged companion despite the screaming engines and beeps of bulldozers going in reverse.

“She told me she is very happy with environmentally concerned organizations,” he said jokingly.

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