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Wetlands restoration is complete

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DEL MAR — The 150-acre restoration of the San Dieguito Wetlands was deemed complete in a Nov. 7 dedication ceremony, bringing to an end 14 years of planning, permitting and construction to create one of the largest projects of its kind on the West Coast.



About 2 million cubic yards of material — enough to fill 75 percent of Qualcomm Stadium — was excavated during the \$90 million project, one of three undertaken to offset any negative impacts on marine life caused by San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station's ocean water cooling system.

The restoration was funded and managed by Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric.

Dredging the canal was not without its challenges, Pete Dietrich, SCE senior vice president and chief nuclear officer, said.

“We had to make sure it would work exactly right, but Mother Nature usually has other thoughts and ideas,” he said.

“We had to build a wetlands project next to a river that's prone to floods without having the river suck it back up,” said David Kay, SCE's manager of environmental projects.

The solution was to build a berm system that directed the sand and sediment to the beach, where we want it, Kay said. “That was an engineering challenge.”

Kay said the high degree of public interest also had the potential to create other challenges.

“There was a lot of cautious studying and restudying to make sure we were doing it right the first time,” Kay said. “That caused it to take a little longer but it was the right approach. People came to the table with good ideas.”

Construction began in 2006 and was expected to take about three years. September marked the final dredging of the river and the full tidal flow — 80

million gallons of water a day — was restored to the lagoon for the first time in 75 years.

The energy companies will provide long-term beach monitoring and ongoing maintenance such as planting, weeding and erosion control. The California Coastal Commission will also be measuring the progress based on three other wetland areas in Southern California.

At last count, the restored wetlands was home to about 200 bird species and millions of fish — some new and others returning, according to Pamela Fair, SDG&E's chief environmental officer.

“Those statistics are a testament to the success of this project,” Fair said. “The next chapter is to bring more people here.”

In addition to guest speakers, the dedication ceremony offered display areas featuring a history of the wetlands, bird watching and animals that call the area home, including marine life and a raccoon, hummingbird, kestrel, hawk and raven.

The day also served as a field trip for a group of fifth-graders from Walter J. Porter Elementary School in the South Bay area. For most, it was their first trip to the wetlands.

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