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San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project now underway with a completion date of 2009

By Whitney Youngs

If you're wondering whether the land east of Interstate-5 and south of Via de la Valle and now occupied by large excavation tractors is protected wetlands, it is, and it just so happens to be the site of recent grading as San Diego Edison in conjunction with Marathon Construction Corporation embark on an estimated \$86 million restoration project of the region.



"Things are going very well; we've just about conquered all of the permit issues, which gives us an almost unencumbered site now, and will soon give us free range to do any part of the project. That's what we have been waiting for, for about a year," said Marathon's President and Project Manager Mike Furby.

Edison is overseeing and funding the effort known as the San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project while Marathon was selected as the contractor, which will restore 150 acres of wetlands in the San Dieguito River Valley by reviving the tidal flows, natural habitat and vegetation to the area.

According to the project's Web site SDlagoon.com, the restoration is a tit-for-tat effort of sorts as it is expected to mitigate the anticipated negative impact on fish populations (loss of fish eggs and larvae) from the water system operations at the San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant located about 33 miles north of the site.

"Edison owns 70 percent of San Onofre [plant] and the project offsets the environmental effects the nuclear power station is causing, and obviously there are some thermal impacts that are affecting the water temperatures and various marine life out in the ocean," said Allison Millard with Southern California Edison.

The project is expected to take three years to complete, with an anticipated daily schedule of Monday through Friday beginning at 7 a.m. Upon completion, the project will create (15 acres) and restore (150 acres) of wetlands and more than 100 acres of tidal salt marsh, in an effort that involves more than 440 total acres on both sides of I-5.

"We've probably excavated over a 150,000 yards of material on the west side of the freeway, and what we are digging over there is going to be the big blue expanse of water that covers close to 50 acres; it will become a lagoon that will always have water in it," said Furby. "We

are going to start working on the north side of the river – just south of Via de la Valle and east of the freeway – starting about March 1. Right now we've cleared the area and we will soon start excavating."

The project will also feature an extended pathway that entails constructing a coastal portion of the Coast to Crest Trail along the river that will aid in regulating public access and will be maintained by The San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Association. The roughly two-and-a-quarter-mile scenic trail will have three viewing platforms and a visitors' center. During the project time that began in mid-September, according to Millard, the Grand Avenue Bridge will be closed. The completion date is slated for the end of 2009.

"This is one of four projects going on – including one in Santa Barbara – that were bid on by various cities, and it seemed that Del Mar was one of the most suitable site locations," added Millard.

The region has been divided into four "areas" – Area I, Area 2A, Area 2B and Area 3 – that stretch from the coastline south of the Del Mar Race Track (Area 1) directly east and south of Via de la Valle (Area 3). The construction, scheduled through early February in the varied areas, range from grading and excavation to the compression of disposal materials.

The San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project constitutes the first wetlands project since 1995 that occurred at the Carlsbad Batiquitos Lagoon. The project has been on the drawing board for more than 15 years and has come to fruition with Edison, the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority and the city of Del Mar. Edison has the obligation of maintaining the wetlands for the duration the power plant is in operation (2050). The San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority is then expected to take over the maintenance; in the meantime, an endowment fund has been created by Edison to fund the maintenance in the future.

The design and environmental review of the project began in 1991, while the project in conception dates back to the 1970s. With more than two million cubic yards expected to be excavated, the restoration will increase salt marshes and more water capacity within the lagoon. The design also includes engineered berms that will protect the wetlands from flood sediments, and the installment of four nesting sites in the hopes they will attract endangered species like the Least Tern bird.

"After 15 years of planning, and numerous coordination efforts, we are breaking ground with much excitement. We want to thank everyone for their continued patience. We are ready to take on this project that will enhance the neighboring communities and improve the surrounding environment," said Furby.