



Local environmental entity updates RSF Association board on current projects

By Whitney Youngs

Defined as a Joint Powers Authority within San Diego County and preserving land as far west as the coast of Del Mar to as far east as Vulcan Mountain near Julian, the San Dieguito River Park (SDRP) is at the helm of many environmentally-friendly projects. Its work was a key topic of discussion at the April 19 meeting of the Rancho Santa Fe Association Board of Directors as a representative spoke on what the agency has been up to in recent years.

The organization's executive director, Dick Bobertz, who has been with the agency for about nine years, said the main area of focused planning basically entails land that one can see if they were standing in the San Dieguito River, which he called "the view shed."

Bobertz gave a brief history of the entity and said within the first few years of its conception, the San Dieguito River Park concentrated on the planning process and establish the group within the community. The SDRP board adopted a policy that it would never use the power of condemnation as the matter seemed to be an issue, considering the legislation that defines the agency does equip it with such authority. The SDRP only deals with property owners who are willing to sell land as a way to conserve land through purchasing power. Over the next six or seven years, the SDRP focused mainly on land acquisition in a planning area that essentially spans 80,000 acres, two-thirds of which is publicly owned. The continual goal of the SDRP is to acquire unprotected land and create a continuous 55-mile trail that stretches from the ocean to the mountains and desert.

"I won't say we will ever be done with property acquisition," Bobertz said, "because we are trying to get a continuous link for the purposes of our trail and also for the benefit of nature because you need a continuous natural corridor for animal species to have a wide enough range to survive."

Bobertz showed a DVD presentation on a landmark preservation project currently taking place on the land east and west of Interstate-5 and south of Via de la Valle called the San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project.

"We've been out there about six months and it's going amazingly well," said Bobertz.

Once completed, the site will encompass 440 acres that includes bird-nesting sites for the endangered California Least Tern bird, a network of public trails and a visitor's center.

San Diego Edison, which is footing the price of the effort estimated at \$86

million, hired Marathon Construction Corporation and will restore 150 acres and create 150 acres of wetlands in the San Dieguito River Valley by reviving the tidal flows, natural habitat and vegetation to the area. A major aspect of the project is to remove the sand that is plugging the river channel as a way to keep the tidal inlet open. The removal of about 125,000 cubic yards of sand will be relocated to both the beach and used as the surface of the tern's nests.

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.

Part of the broad upland area of the region will serve as a large shallow, sub-tidal basin that provides a habitat for fish reproduction and food for wetland bird species. Along the river an upland area will be lowered to create tidal marshland, the site of a variety of natural plants that could attract the endangered California Clapper Rail bird. The material excavated will be used to build a low berm separating the basin from the river, which will also act as a nesting site. The berm and others in the region will protect the basin from being filled with sediment carried by river floods that will, instead, flow along the river and into the sandy nearby beaches. The upland areas will also create habitats for land animals like the cottontail rabbit and the burrowing owl, and various reptiles.

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. The roughly two-and-a-quarter-mile scenic trail will have viewing platforms and a visitors' center. The completion date is slated for the end of 2009. The design and environmental review of the project began in 1991 while the project in conception dates back to the 1970s.

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, Edison has created an endowment fund in the amount of \$500,000 to fund the maintenance in the future. "It won't be touched for the next 40 years, and each year the cost will be evaluated to make sure we have enough money in the bank to produce the revenue we need to maintain the project," said Bobertz. "We expect to have the experience to know what things are really going to cost"