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San Dieguito Lagoon Restoration Effort Benefits Business, Too

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The San Dieguito Lagoon wetland restoration project is more than a sanctuary for coastal wildlife. The extensive and environmentally sensitive project has generated millions of dollars in contracts for local construction and environmental companies.



Crews work on restoring the San Dieguito Lagoon in Del Mar and San Diego as part of a nature preserve project.

“Because of the sensitive nature of the project we’re building, we made it our top priority to only hire the finest proven companies to assist us in designing, permitting and constructing this first of its kind, multi-habitat preserve,” said Samir Tanious, project manager for Southern California Edison. “What we didn’t expect but really appreciate is that some of the top companies in the world with the specialties necessary were actually from San Diego, which has been a godsend.”

SCE selected this highly visible location, partially in Del Mar and San Diego along Interstate 5, to create 150 acres of new wetlands in part of a 440-acre nature preserve as mitigation for new operating permits granted at their San Onofre nuclear power plant. SCE also selected Marathon Construction of San Diego and Coastal Environments of La Jolla to assist with development of this unique project.

Marathon received a \$22 million contract with SCE to excavate a sub-tidal lagoon, place berms along the San Dieguito River and construct wetlands for the length of the project.

The project is the size of 32 football fields. It required the removal of more than 800,000 cubic yards of dirt. Marathon has already excavated the lagoon and transported dirt to the east side of the I-5 to create a new habitat for endangered species.

Mike Furby, president of Marathon, said the project has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding projects his company has worked on.

Another local company to apply its expertise is Coastal Environments. Hany Elwany, president of Coastal Environments, an oceanographic, coastal engineer and environmental consulting firm, has been monitoring the San Dieguito Lagoon since 1992 for SCE. He has also worked on the Agua Hedionda Lagoon in Carlsbad, Buena Vista Lagoon between Carlsbad and Oceanside, La Jolla Children’s Pool and Los Penasquitos and San Elijo lagoons in San Diego.

SCE also contracted Encinitas-based Strategic Management Group, a media company specializing in communications for environmental projects. Kelly Sarber, president of Strategic Management Group, said the project has been rewarding because it will provide a preserve space for numerous endangered species and for the team she has worked with.

Additional local companies working on the preserve include Collaborative Services of San Diego, Construction Testing and Engineering Inc. of Escondido, Ground Service Technology Inc. of Escondido, RECON Environmental Inc. of San Diego, and Project Design Consultants of San Diego. Only one construction or consulting company was contracted from outside of San Diego County.

David Kay, manager of environmental projects for SCE, said he is optimistic this new nature preserve will create benefits, including reestablishing new populations of endangered species to the area while preserving a valuable open space asset for the public to enjoy in perpetuity.

Del Mar Mayor Carl Hilliard said the community is very welcoming of this project.

"I don't think you will find anyone in Del Mar who is not in support of the lagoon restoration project," said Hilliard. "This will be the beginning of the beach to mountain trail and we are looking forward to it."

The San Dieguito River Park, a joint agency consisting of San Diego County, Del Mar, Escondido, Poway, San Diego and Solana Beach, is building a system of trails running from the San Dieguito Lagoon in Del Mar to Volcan Mountain just north of Julian. The corridor is 55 miles long and will start at San Dieguito Lagoon in Del Mar.

The Del Mar Fairgrounds recently teamed up with the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy to restore an acre of land adjacent to SCE's lagoon restoration project. The restoration project on fairgrounds land is an extension of SCE's efforts.

Kina Paegert, spokeswoman for the Del Mar Fairgrounds, said many non-native plants were removed and native plants are being replanted on this parcel.

The river restoration project was funded by a \$19,000 grant from the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project, an organization charged with acquiring, restoring and expanding coastal wetlands and watersheds.