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**Lagoon restoration celebrated
Eastern section of River Park dealt setback**



The San Dieguito Lagoon restoration project has reached the halfway point.

By Jim Kerr

The occasion of reaching the halfway point of construction on the ambitious San Dieguito Lagoon wetland restoration project gave the community a chance to celebrate that progress during an open house held Nov.14 at Del Mar's Powerhouse Community Center.

Called one of the largest restoration projects of its kind anywhere, Southern California Edison's \$86 million mitigation project will eventually see the creation of 150 acres of new wetlands as part of a 440 acre nature reserve park in the San Dieguito River Valley stretching 55 miles from Del Mar to Julian.

Although progress on the overall river park took a tragic hit during the recent wildfires, the western wetland portion is right on schedule according to Edison's project manager Samir Tanious.

"This is a time to celebrate our progress," said Tanious, who led the presentation at the open house.

That progress has been impressive, with over 70 percent of heavy equipment excavation on hundreds of acres having been completed in the course of just over one year.

Now visible on both sides of Interstate 5 are numerous acres of new wetlands including a new sub-tidal lagoon between I-5 and the Del Mar Fairgrounds stretching the size of 37 football fields. In all, 75 acres have been cleared west of the freeway with 25,000 cubic yards of beach quality sand placed in three waterfowl nesting sites.

East of I-5, 218 total acres have been cleared with 42,000 cubic yards of sand placed on one large nesting site.

At the same time Marathon Construction has been in the process of constructing 8,000 feet of protective berms and buffers to protect the wetland system from floods, while, the project is being

monitored by an array of archeologists, paleontologists and wildlife experts. The entire project is to be completed by spring of 2009.

Tanious said since the project commenced last year, the flurry of activity in the lagoon area has prompted numerous questions from the community, with many wondering if the construction was for commercial or residential projects.

"We are building homes," said Tanious, "homes for fish and waterfowl.

Several other successes were touted by Marathon's president Mike Furby, including a successful cordgrass germination program with seedlings replanted from a growing area at the Tijuana Estuary.

"A key to this is a good healthy planting program," said Furby. "The bottom line is this is going to be a beautiful park."

The celebratory mood among many involved with the river park has been tempered though by the damage inflicted by October's Witch Creek fire. About 62 percent of the San Dieguito River Park was burned by the fire, which followed almost the exact boundaries of the park's focused planning area from Lake Sutherland to Rancho Santa Fe.

San Dieguito River Park Executive Director Dick Bobertz says the large swath of destruction was devastating.

"All the things we have done in the past 10 years were wiped out," he said.

Included in that destruction were the river park's offices, the nearby 130-year-old Sikes Adobe historic farmhouse, and countless animal habitats, which the damage to, Bobertz says, will take numerous years to process. Also destroyed were trucks, tractors and other equipment, along with papers, maps and records on the project dating back a decade.

"They were hit very hard," said Del Mar City Councilman Richard Earnest recently. "Not only the river park office, but the ranger's office, tools, tractors, bridges and signage. A lot of progress has been delayed to say the least. It was tragic.

"The open space is still there, but the habitat is not," added Earnest, who is a Del Mar representative on the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority. "It's going to take time and money."

At a recent Del Mar City Council meeting, council member Crystal Crawford, who also sits on the JPA appealed to "packrats" in Del Mar, asking longtime residents to search their personal collections for any historical documents or maps they may have pertaining to the river park. A similar appeal went out last week at a Carmel Valley Planning Board meeting.

Bobertz says he has already gotten responses from the community and says especially valuable are full agenda packets from river park meetings held throughout the years, which could be pieced together in a paper-trail restoration effort.

Bobertz vows the 1880s Sikes Adobe will also be restored.

"You can replace paper, but you can't replace something like the Sikes," he said. "But its walls are still standing and we will rebuild.

"We'll come back," adds Bobertz. "You can't keep a good river park down."

For information on the lagoon restoration project go to www.sdlagoon.com. The San Dieguito River Park site is at www.sdrp.com.