The San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project

For information on the progress of the San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project, please call (858) 259-1955 or email DestreeL@collaborativeservices.biz

The Coastal Development Permit for the San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project was approved by the California Coastal Commission at their October 2005 meeting in San Diego. The Coastal Commission website has the staff report for details of the permit. Construction completion is slated for the end of 2009.

Project Background

The coastal area, which includes the San Dieguito Lagoon, is the "gateway" to the San Dieguito River Park. It has vital importance for the ecology of the region - for birds as a stop on the Pacific Flyway, as nesting and foraging areas for endangered species, and as a fish hatchery. The San Dieguito coastal area is also a significant scenic resource for residents and visitors in Solana Beach, Del Mar, and San Diego. The projects described on this page, Wetlands Restoration Plan, Non-Tidal Habitat and Public Access Plan, are therefore very high priorities for the Park. A Park Master Plan for the Coastal Area that addresses the proposed wetland restoration, non-tidal habitat restoration and public access and interpretation was adopted by the Board of Directors of the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority on September 15, 2000.

WETLAND RESTORATION PLAN

Project Summary

The San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project is a project that will implement a tidal wetland restoration project at the San Dieguito Lagoon that will 1) restore the aquatic functions of the lagoon through permanent inlet maintenance and expansion of the tidal basin and 2) create subtidal and intertidal habitats on both the east and west sides of Interstate 5 (I-5). This proposal is part of a Park Master Plan that has been adopted for the coastal area that would also provide for non-tidal wetland and upland habitat restoration and public access. It is anticipated that tidal restoration work would be accomplished primarily by Southern California Edison and partners (SCE), provided the restoration satisfies the conditions of the California Coastal Commission (CCC) permit for the construction and operation of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station (SONGS). The San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority (JPA), Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), and a variety of state and local agencies would be involved in the implementation of the remainder of the Park Master Plan for the overall project area.

On September 15, 2000, the San Dieguito River Park Board of Directors certified the Final Environmental Impact Report/Statement (FEIR/S) for the San Dieguito Park Master Plan and Wetland Restoration Project, approving the "Mixed Habitat" Alternative. Details of this alternative, and the status of the project are described below.

Project Location

The project site is in the western San Dieguito River Valley within the northwestern-most portions of the City of San Diego and the City of Del Mar. The project boundaries are generally located from El Camino Real west to the ocean and include the publicly owned properties south of Via de la Valle and north of the Carmel Valley planning area. The Boudreau property is directly adjacent to the Wetland Restoration Project, and offers an opportunity to extend the restoration.

History

The San Dieguito Lagoon was once the largest of the six San Diego coastal lagoons, and has the largest watershed. The marsh area alone is believed to have been over 600 acres, while the entire lagoon probably covered 1,000 acres. Over the years, San Dieguito was subjected to major filling activities and lost over half of its marshes. The filling activities included Highway 101, Jimmy Durante Boulevard, residential land development, the Del Mar Fairgrounds and a World War II airport. Two large dams were constructed upstream on the San Dieguito River, greatly reducing freshwater inflows. The result of all these activities was year-round closure of the lagoon mouth beginning in the 1940s. Only large winter floods or bull-dozers open the mouth periodically. Restoration of the San Dieguito coastal wetlands has been a stated goal of the Cities of Del Mar and San Diego, and the organizers of the San Dieguito River Park for almost two decades. In 1983, utilizing in part a $1.3 million grant from the California Coastal Conservancy, the California Department of Fish and Game created a tidal basin in a 70-acre area of the southern lagoon. In addition, the lagoon mouth was reopened, restoring tidal influence, at least temporarily, to the entire coastal wetland. The ultimate restoration goal, as stated in the San Dieguito Lagoon Resource Enhancement Program (adopted in 1979) and the San Dieguito River Park Concept Plan (adopted in 1994), is to restore what remains of the historically significant San Dieguito Lagoon system.

Current efforts to design and implement a restoration plan for the San Dieguito wetlands arose from the need to provide mitigation for impacts caused by SONGS Units 2 and 3. Following several public hearings before the CCC, it was determined that one of the Coastal Development Permit conditions associated with the operation of SONGS Units 2 and 3, the condition requiring the owners of SONGS to create or substantially restore 150 acres of tidal wetlands, would be implemented at the San Dieguito Lagoon. As a result of this decision, SCE, as the managing owner of SONGS (other owners include San Diego Gas & Electric, the City of Riverside, and the City of Anaheim), has developed a coastal wetlands restoration plan for the San Dieguito Lagoon that is intended to satisfy this condition. The determination as to whether or not the proposed restoration plan meets the permit condition is the sole responsibility of the CCC.

The SCE proposal to restore coastal wetlands is one element, albeit the

predominant element, of a larger restoration and public access plan for all of the public open space lands within the San Dieguito River Valley that lie between El Camino Real on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west. An important component of the San Dieguito River Park Concept Plan and the City of Del Mar's San Dieguito Lagoon Resource Enhancement Program is the vision of a restored lagoon with its coastal wetlands and associated transition areas, nontidal wetlands and uplands, as well as provisions for compatible public access and interpretive/educational opportunities.

Project Description

The goal of the project is to preserve, improve, and create a variety of habitats within the project site to increase and maintain fish and wildlife and ensure the protection of endangered species. Project objectives are that the wetland project design should ensure adequate tidal and riverine flushing and circulation to support a diversity of biological resources while maintaining the appearance of a natural wetland ecosystem. Proposals for upland restoration complement the adjoining coastal wetland areas and provide habitats that have historically occurred in the area. Proposed public access and use areas are sited in a manner that would not interfere with the naturally functioning ecosystem or the open space character of the western San Dieguito River Valley.

The San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project includes the following elements: 1) tidal inlet maintenance to promote regular tidal exchange through excavation of the river channel and periodic maintenance dredging (no physical structures would be constructed at the inlet or on the beach to maintain an open channel); 2) excavation of tidal and upland areas to create subtidal and intertidal habitat; 3) creation of seasonal salt marsh; 4) provision of up to 19 acres within the project area for the creation of nesting habitat for the California least tern and western snowy plover; 5) construction of berms within the river's effective flow area in order to maintain the existing sediment flows within the river and to the beach (it is important to note that these berms are not intended to serve as flood control devices); 6) dredge disposal sites within the project boundary; 7) restoration of native habitat to non-tidal areas surrounding the wetland restoration project; and 8) creation of public access trails and opportunities for interpretation.

Implementation of the wetland restoration project will require excavation and disposal of approximately 2.3 million cubic yards of dredge material. Some of the excavated material will be used on-site, for construction of the berms and the nesting sites. All beach quality sand that is not used to create the nesting sites will be deposited on the beach. The remaining excavated material will be deposited at various sites within the project area.

Non-Tidal Uplands Habitat and Public Access Plan

In addition to tidal wetlands restoration, the project also includes an upland habitat restoration and public access component. The San Dieguito River Park is planning the non-tidal and associated upland areas within the project area, as well as planning for appropriate public access. The restoration proposals are intended to convert old agricultural fields and other disturbed areas to habitats believed to have occurred in the area prior to disturbance. Habitats to be restored include nontidal wetlands such as riparian scrub and freshwater marsh, coastal sage scrub, native grasslands, chaparral, and salt marsh transition. The plan also recommends removal of invasive, nonnative species from the surrounding wetland areas, restoration of historic riparian corridors, provision of habitat for threatened and endangered wildlife, and creation of habitat suitable for use by migrating birds such as Canada geese.

The following nontidal habitats (including approximate acreages) are planned:

For the area east of I-5:
Southern willow scrub - 19 acres
Chaparral - 12 acres
Coastal sage scrub - 60 acres
Freshwater marsh - 0.33 acres
Native grassland - 50 acres
Salt marsh transition - 20 acres
For the area west of I-5:
Coastal sage scrub - 25 acres
Salt marsh transition - 4 acres

Consistent with the San Dieguito River Park Concept Plan, the project includes proposals for compatible passive recreational use in the area, specifically trails. A wildlife viewing area with trails open only to pedestrians is proposed for the uplands in the southeastern portion of the project area (Mesa Loop Trail). A parking area with up to 25 spaces would be required to accommodate this use. A segment of the San Dieguito River Park's Coast to Crest Trail is also proposed within the project area and would be located along the project's northern boundary. The Coast to Crest Trail would be a multi-use, non-motorized trail consisting of an 8-foot-wide, hard-surfaced trail and an adjoining 4-foot-wide dirt trail. The hard-surfaced trail would accommodate bicycles and would be designed to meet the standards required under the Americans with Disabilities Act. The probable surface would be a polymer binder mixed with decomposed granite to form a hardened but natural appearance. The dirt path would be provided for hikers and equestrians. The Coast to Crest Trail would extend from Jimmy Durante Blvd. on the west to El Camino Real on the east. Approximately 1000 feet of the trail beginning at the west end is planned as a boardwalk for pedestrian use only. At Jimmy Durante Blvd., trail users could cross the bridge via the sidewalk, and continue east on the Del Mar River Path.






FACTS ABOUT THE SAN DIEGUITO WETLANDS RESTORATION PROJECT

http://sdlagoon.com/facts.htm

- This is the first large wetlands restoration project in San Diego County since 1995. The last wetlands restoration project in San Diego was at Carlsbad's Batiquitos Lagoon.
- This project will add more than 161 acres of new wetlands, including over 100 acres of tidal salt marsh. The overall project involves 440 acres on both sides of I-5.
- This project is environmentally designed such that it will have no negative impacts on beaches or any other part of the project areas. On the contrary, we expect the project will be beneficial for adjacent beaches.
- This project will protect the existing habitat and marine life of the lagoon both during and after construction. This is why our construction team recently opened the lagoon inlet on September 22nd.
- This project is designed to increase the diversity of the existing habitat and marine life in the area. Plantings of cordgrass hosted from Batiquitos Lagoon and the Tijuana Estuary will hopefully be successful at drawing the endangered light footed clapperail to the San Dieguito Lagoon.
- SCE is anticipating spending about $86 million on the restoration project at the San Dieguito Lagoon. The project has been on the drawing board for over 15 years.
- Southern California Edison is taking the lead for the project along with the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority and the City Of Del Mar.
- The project is being performed by SCE as mitigation for the loss of fish eggs and larvae attributed to the San Onofre nuclear generating station 33 miles north of the project site.
- SCE is obligated to maintain a functioning wetland for the operating life of the power plant, or until about the year 2050.
- At some point in time SCE will turn the job of maintaining the lagoon over to the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority. An endowment fund sufficient to make sure the job gets done has been created by SCE to fund the maintenance in the future by the SDRPJPA.
- Design and environmental review of the restoration project began in 1991. Many permits had to be secured from agencies such as the CCC, USACOE, California Department of Fish and Game, the California Water Quality Control Board, California State Lands Commission, Caltrans and the cities of Del Mar and San Diego
- The project entails the excavation of over 2 million cubic yards of material which will create a greater expanse of blue water and noticeable increases in salt marshes, fish populations and birds. back to top
- This excavation will also create additional water capacity to the lagoon providing for better flows and velocities through the inlet to help keep it open. SCE is committed to keeping the inlet open in perpetuity.
- Lagoon and inlet design performed by Dr. Hany Elwany of Coastal Environments in La Jolla, CA . It is anticipated that up to 25,000 cubic yards of beach sand material could be collected annually at the mouth of the inlet where it would be beneficial to replace lost sand at the Del Mar beaches.
- The project design includes the construction of close to 8,000 lineal feet of engineered earthen berms, the wetlands gatekeepers. The engineered berms will protect the wetlands from flood borne sediments and withstand a 100 year flood.
- The berms will also contain pipes within the berm high enough to let river water pass through during a heavy river flow as well as extreme high tides. Sediments normally travel along the river bottom, too low to go through the pipes. With most of the sediments controlled and directed via the river there is less chance of the sediments getting into the wetlands and filling them up and more chance the sediments reach the mouth of the inlet to distribute themselves on the del mar beaches.
- In addition to the berms there will be 4 least tern nesting sites constructed, encompassing about 16 acres. These nesting sites will hopefully attract the nesting of the endangered least tern.
- The lagoon anchors the western end of the San Dieguito River Park's 55 mile open space and trail system. The eastern end is Volcan Mountain near Julian, CA.
- The San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project will include in it's boundaries the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority's approximately 2 ¼ mile long scenic trail system including a 1,500 lineal foot boardwalk, 3 viewing platforms, and an interpretive visitors center.
- The San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project is such an extremely interesting and special project because of all the sciences involved. Archeologists, paleontologists, bird and plant biologists, restoration biologists, coastal engineers, hydrologists, civil engineers, geotechnical engineers and geologists will all help contribute to the success and the oversight of the project.
- The project will provide appropriate habitats for all endangered species. This will not only protect such species, but also help increase their population.
- We expect the construction project to have no negative impacts on traffic or public convenience. The project is self contained since almost all materials necessary for construction can be developed from the site and almost all equipment and vehicular traffic is all off road and within the project.
- We began construction in mid September 2006 after obtaining all the appropriate permits from the relevant federal, state and local agencies.
- Construction completion is slated for the end of 2009.

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San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project