



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# The Coastal Program

## *Success in San Diego Bay*



### *Caring for Our Coastal Habitats*

#### **San Elijo Lagoon Restoration Project**

San Elijo Lagoon is located on the San Diego County coastline of southern California. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southern California/San Diego Coastal Program worked with partners to ensure its long-term health.

#### ***Salt Marsh in Peril***

Once a tidally influenced salt marsh and mudflat dominated estuary, San Elijo Lagoon has been chopped into pieces by roads, and railroad fills. These changes have increased the frequency of sand blockages at the lagoon's mouth. Such blockages lead to stagnation and stressful conditions in the lagoon's aquatic community. Fish kills and loss of biological diversity, along with increased sedimentation would ultimately cause the lagoon's aquatic ecosystem be replaced by an entirely different habitat: a weed covered upland habitat with little value to wildlife.

Now visualize a "healthy" San Elijo lagoon: it is regularly flushed by the tide and has shallow sloughs teeming with small fish, crabs, and mollusks. The mudflats that appear between tides are "pastures" for thousands of migrating shorebirds and waterfowl. The salt marsh provides nesting habitat for

sensitive species, including the endangered light-footed clapper rail and Belding's savannah sparrow. Fish eating birds, such as the endangered California least tern, other tern species, herons, and egrets forage over the tidal waters, rich with the fish they like to eat.

#### ***Returning Health***

Thanks to a creative partnership, this vision is becoming a reality. After years of seeking funds for emergency, one-time sand removal efforts, the Service's Coastal Program and its partners—San Elijo Conservancy, County of San Diego, State Coastal Conservancy, Southern California Wetlands Clearinghouse—have found a way to keep the lagoon mouth free from sand without using expensive, unpopular measures like dredging a new inlet and building bridges. The creation of an interest-generating endowment guarantees a funding stream that makes continuous, small scale intervention feasible. The non-structural, relatively inexpensive, solution involves a contract with a small dredging company that will remove sand from the existing inlet on an "as-needed" basis. This will keep the lagoon mouth open to tidal influence, maintaining the health of the lagoon's aquatic community.

#### ***A Long-awaited Success***

San Elijo Conservancy took the lead in pulling partners together to create an endowment account that will maintain the long-term health of the lagoon and surrounding area. Funds (and awareness) were raised through the efforts of the Conservancy in applying for government grants and obtaining contributions from local citizens. This habitat restoration project helps reverse a long trend of coastal wetland degradation and loss in rapidly-developing Southern California.



San Elijo lagoon.

Photo: Jack Fancher, USFWS

## South San Diego Bay Saltworks Acquisition and Restoration

Located in the extreme south end of San Diego Bay, the Western Salt Works has been in operation for decades. This 800-acre site was once a thriving estuarine system that was home to numerous fish and wildlife species. The Service's Coastal Program, working with the Refuges and Endangered Species programs, acquired the entire 800 acres into the Refuge system, and is preparing habitat management and restoration plans.

### ***Creative Partnership***

The story began with an endangered least tern nesting on a closed military base at San Diego Bay. Because of this tern's endangered, protected status, the nesting site was to be perpetually monitored and managed by the Service. However, the local port authority wanted the military site for airport expansion. To compensate for the loss of the least tern's nest, the port authority purchased the Western Salt works to allow nest site improvements there. This operating saltworks has some existing areas that are heavily used by certain nesting seabirds but with less use by the least tern. The saltworks plus hundreds of acres of shallow water marine habitat was turned over to the Service to manage and restore. An endowment was also provided to the Service for planning, management, and limited restoration.

The Service's Coastal Program laid the foundation for this accomplishment by conducting nesting and migrating bird surveys, providing technical assistance, and advocating improved habitat management at the saltworks even prior to the change in ownership. The restoration plan is being prepared in conjunction with the Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan and south San Diego Bay stakeholders. As part of the core planning team, the Coastal Program continues to provide technical assistance, and the preliminary engineering support for the design and evaluation of saltworks restoration alternatives.

### ***Big Payoff for Wildlife***

The acquired property provides immediate fish and wildlife benefits, particularly for nesting seabirds, endangered California least tern, and



**Least tern with chick.**

**Photo: B. W. Mansell**

threatened western snowy plover. Nesting habitats on the dikes are now protected from disturbance and predators. Together, with our partners and stakeholders, the Service has created the opportunity to reverse the century-long history of wetland loss and degradation in San Diego Bay.

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