



SAN JACINTO: Dozer work starts on river ponds

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No one said, “Gentlemen start your engines,” but that’s what happened this week as heavy equipment operators started grubbing and clearing a 35-acre area of the San Jacinto riverbed where water percolation ponds will be sculpted in the next month.

The activity began Wednesday, May 23, in the riverbed east of Esplanade Avenue in San Jacinto after biologists finished a weeks-long effort to trap 43 endangered San Bernardino kangaroo rats and relocate them away from the construction zone. That move required environmental studies spanning several years that ultimately led to changing the location of the ponds to have the least impact on the species.

After helping the biological consultants remove the rodent traps that morning, “I said, ‘Are we ready?’” said Jeff Hale, Eastern Municipal Water District’s water resources supervisor, and he was given the go-ahead to start.

July 1 is the projected date for initial delivery of imported water, according to Peter Odencrans, spokesman for Eastern, one of four water providers involved in the project. The others are Lake Hemet Municipal Water District and the cities of Hemet and San Jacinto.

The water will replenish depleted underground water supplies in the San Jacinto Valley and provide water to the Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians under terms of a landmark water-rights settlement that also involves the federal government and Los Angeles-based Metropolitan Water District.

The work by Eastern and Lake Hemet dozer operators removed chaparral plants, except for two “islands” of shrubs where bird nests were found. To comply with migratory bird laws, the hummingbird and sparrow nests must be protected until any baby birds leave the nest, Odencrans said.

Nearby, another piece of heavy equipment excavated earth to remove an estimated 2,200 feet of cable, pipe and railroad track that had been part of an old dike. Security vehicles are patrolling the area to keep trespassers out.

Later in the week, Hale said the approximately 125 feet of fencing with two “wing wall” extensions would be installed one foot below ground and three feet above ground to keep rodents out of the work area. Two pipes will be laid to ultimately carry 8,000 gallons of water a minute to the ponds.