

Opening of restored habitat sparks concern

By Susan Abram, Staff Writer for the Daily News

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LAKE BALBOA - Nearly 28 acres of restored habitat within Anthony C. Beilenson Park is expected to open to the public soon, but some residents remain concerned about how native wildlife and plants will be protected.

The \$4.5 million Bull Creek Ecosystem Restoration project began almost a year ago to revive the area along the Sepulveda Dam Flood Control Basin. The goal is to encourage 200 species of wild birds, including the American goldfinch, the ash-throated flycatcher and the Bullock's oriole, to nest and thrive in the area commonly known as Balboa Park.

The area may be open as soon as late May because of high interest among the public to enjoy a portion of the park that has been fenced off since June, said Jay Field, a spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is overseeing the project.

But some members of the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Areas Steering Committee and the Encino Neighborhood Council say the opening may be too soon.

Mounds of dirt remain and young plants have yet to establish themselves.

"Our little plantings look like sticks out there, and what might happen with the public using it is they might just see the area as a hill of dirt," said Sharon Brewer, a parks and environment alternate for the Encino Neighborhood Council.

The result may be a negative impact on wildlife.

"People may go in there with remote-control cars like they used to, and I'm worried about people walking over the little plants, thinking they are twigs," she said. "The whole thing with wildlife is they need to be left alone."

A meeting between the community and the Army Corps of Engineers will be held at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Sepulveda Garden Center in Encino to discuss those concerns, said Glenn Bailey, a member of the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Areas Steering Committee.

"We just want to make sure that when it's open, there's adequate protection, that the plants get established," Bailey said.

Field said the Army Corps plans to put up signs and hopes more upcoming meetings and workshops will help educate the public to stay on footpaths.

As part of the restoration project, a C-shaped side channel was built to allow reclaimed water from Lake Balboa to flow around an island, along with pedestrian bridges over key parts of the channel.

"I think if we educate the public, provide proper signage, hold workshops and public meetings, I'm sure the public is going to respond," Field said.

The Bull Creek Channel in the Sepulveda Basin is a federally owned flood control region. The government leases about three-quarters of the 2,097-acre site to the city of Los Angeles

Last year, a private contractor hired by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had installed a fence around the site, keeping some parkgoers from using about one-third of the pedestrian walkways.

The restored area will open up an area the public may not have seen in decades, Bailey said, because of invasive plants, such as arundo, that had all but choked the creek.

The bamboo-like arundo, introduced to California a century ago, can grow up to 25 feet high and chokes out beneficial native species. The plant absorbs up to four times more water than willows. Thickets of arundo block storm runoff, which often results in flooding.

The Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Areas Steering Committee, made up of experts from several conservation groups, had been working to get the Bull Creek area restored for years. Luckily some federal funding was made available by U.S. Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Tarzana, which helped push the project forward.

In addition, the project will restore the native flora and fauna to the area, and is expected to improve the water quality, due to the removal of trash and unwanted debris.

"Once the vegetation establishes, it will make it more attractive, more usable for people and provide better habitat," Bailey said. "I know it looks bare now, but it will regrow.

"Yet that's part of the concern," he said. "We need to give it that time, so we don't love it to death."

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