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**Water refloods Bahia Grande**

**Officials predict restored wetland will attract marine life**

BY KEVIN GARCIA  
The Brownsville Herald

July 17, 2005 — Large yellow machines dug deep into the earth, allowing water from the ship channel to flood an area that has been just out of its reach for more than seven decades.

The Bahia Grande was reflooded Saturday morning, ending the nation's largest wetland restoration project.

"My personal feeling is that the marine life will come in," said Nino Gutierrez, deputy port director for the Brownsville Navigation District.

The Bahia Grande, just north of Highway 48 between Brownsville and Port Isabel, dried up in the 1930s and has since been a source for dust storms for Port Isabel and surrounding areas.

The reflooding project, which connected the Bahia Grande to the Brownsville Ship Channel through a pilot channel, affected 10,000 acres owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

USFWS and BND officials planned to flood the area on July 28, but the approach of Hurricane Emily prompted a schedule change.

Eventually a permanent channel will be completed that will keep homes in Port Isabel, Laguna Vista and Brownsville from being damaged by dust storms, and provide homes for native and migrating wetland species.

"(The Bahia Grande was) dry and flowing dust where it should be tidally influenced wetlands," said John Wallace, manager for the Laguna Atascosa Refuge, which covers part of the reflooded area.

The pilot channel is the first step to returning the area to its natural state, and could have been flooded earlier had it not been for some temporary residents staying in the area — a flock of least terns and their nests. The reflooding was originally scheduled for June but officials decided to delay the project until the birds' eggs hatched.

"The least terns, along with a majority of the birds here, are protected under international law where you cannot take the birds or disturb their nests," Wallace said. "These areas have been like this for 70 years, so what's another month?"

Biologists with USFWS inspected the area Friday and found the hatchlings still in the area were capable of leaving with their parents before area was flooded.

"The hurricane is going to fill up the basin, even if it doesn't come through, and that is always beneficial to these dry beds," Wallace said.

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