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Workers recently lifted the Del Dios Gorge bridge into place across the San Dieguito River.

**QUINN EASTMAN** Staff Photographer

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## New bridge crosses Del Dios Gorge

By: QUINN EASTMAN - Staff Writer

DEL DIOS -- Regional park officials were celebrating Monday after installing a bridge for hikers, bikers and equestrians last week across the San Dieguito River just south of Lake Hodges Dam.

The bridge is part of the route of the San Dieguito River Park's 55-mile Coast to Crest trail, which is planned to one day extend from the beach near Del Mar to Volcan Mountain north of Julian.

"It's pretty amazing to actually have it there now," said Susan Carter, the River Park's deputy director, on Monday.

Construction crews assembled the 180-foot bridge, the Coast to Crest trail's largest so far, on-site last week and lifted it into place by crane Friday morning. Motorists on Del Dios Highway encountered some traffic delays when the hefty cranes were arriving last week, she said.

R.J. Bullard Construction has a \$623,000 contract for the bridge's installation. The bridge itself cost close to \$200,000, she said.

The next few weeks of construction will connect the Del Dios Gorge trail with the north side of the bridge, now several feet above ground, Carter said.

"We have to build the trail up to meet it," she said.

Eventually, the Del Dios Gorge trail will allow people to hike between Lake Hodges Dam and the Santa Fe Valley trail, which recently opened next to the Crosby Estates development south of Del Dios Highway.

But the River Park needs to find money, probably from state grants, to complete the trail between the new bridge and the dam. Some of that section will run just south of Del Dios Highway. State grants paid for most of the bridge.

Retaining walls are planned to provide hikers enough space between the highway and the Del Dios Gorge below, Carter said.

"It is a physical challenge, which converts into expensive," she said.

After the opening of the nearby Santa Fe Valley trail, the Lemon Twist fruit stand on Del Dios Highway has been getting more customers, said Hermelindo Ramos, who works at the fruit stand. A parking area for the trail lies behind the fruit stand, which is near Calle Ambiente.

North of the dam, a San Diego County Water Authority construction project is keeping the continuation of the River Park's trail next to Lake Hodges closed for safety reasons.

The Water Authority contributed \$71,000 to the cost of the Del Dios Gorge trail, as mitigation for its two-year closure of the trail.

The Water Authority is building a pipeline between Lake Hodges and Olivenhain Reservoir and a pump station. They are part of a set of projects planned by the Water Authority that would allow it to move water around the county in case of an emergency, such as an earthquake.

According to the Water Authority's Web site, the pipeline's tunnel is mostly complete. San Diego Gas & Electric will begin work on a switchyard next to the pump station in May.

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