

Old Escondido Canal clogged for 6 months

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ESCONDIDO – Let there be water.

Clogged for nearly six months, the Escondido Canal reopened yesterday with water flowing through 13 miles of secluded backcountry and pouring into Lake Wohlford.

Heavy rains in late December and early January sent tons of mud and rock cascading into the aging canal, burying about six miles of it and tearing away some sections.

The debris blocked the only source of local drinking water for Escondido and the Vista Irrigation District. The two entities will split the nearly \$500,000 to repair and clear the canal.

Work crews toiled daily in remote locations, sometimes walking miles to the job site and shoveling by hand.

Looking at the muddy water flowing beneath his feet yesterday, canal superintendent Carl Burgess said he's relieved the repair work is almost complete. Burgess, who has worked on the canal for 21 years, said he likes to see it "being used for what it was made for."

He said workers will keep close tabs on the canal over the next week, repairing any cracks that may appear.

Yesterday, water was flowing at a rate of about 112 gallons per second while officials made sure the canal would hold up. They'll continue to increase the flow until it reaches about 375 gallons per second, the typical rate when water is abundant.

The water is brown now and will continue like that for several weeks as dirt and mud that crews didn't remove is flushed out.

The concrete-lined canal, built in the 1890s, cuts through the hillsides north of Escondido. It diverts water from the San Luis Rey River to Lake Wohlford, which the cities tap for drinking water. The San Luis Rey flows from Lake Henshaw, a reservoir north of state Route 76 that's owned by the Vista Irrigation District.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
Superintendent of the Escondido Canal Carl Burgess watched with pleasure yesterday as water flowed again, here from the outfall pipe directing water to Lake Wohlford. Six of 13 miles was blocked by mud and rock during December and January's heavy storms.

John Amodeo, the district's general manager, said the canal's reopening will decrease the reliance on expensive imported water. He estimated that Vista spent about \$1 million more than it budgeted for imported water in 2004-2005 because of the clogged canal. He expects a much better outlook in the next fiscal year if it remains open.

"It means everything. It's our lifeblood," Amodeo said. "We're finally back in business, you might say. This is like a transfusion for us."

The canal's woes can be traced to October 2003 when the Paradise fire burned about 90 percent of the vegetation along it. In December, runoff from one of the worst storms in recent history flowed down slopes, picking up rocks and mud.



Repairing it has been a huge undertaking. Helicopters were used to haul in small excavating equipment and ferry in supplies, such as concrete. On average, a 20-person crew worked daily to clear the canal, said Tim Hinds, a field engineering inspector for the city of Escondido and the project supervisor.

Escondido Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler said that most people don't realize how difficult it is to transport local drinking water to the city.

"I wish everyone could take a hike and see where our local supply comes from," she said. "To have the canal open is very important to us."

In recent drought years, the cities have received little water from the canal, forcing them to import as much as 90 percent from the Colorado River and Northern California. That's significant because local water costs less than half that of imported water, after its filtered and treated, and an abundance could save millions of dollars.

Lake Wohlford, now at 46 percent capacity, has clearly suffered without water from the canal. The shoreline has receded a few hundred feet and several buoys that are supposed to span parts of the lake now sit on land.

Burgess said, "I hope before we're finished here these buoys will all be floating."

