

A couple of pills for West Valley ills

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Call it cosmetic surgery for the hidden scars of an extraordinary landscape, but know it's also a cure for the disease.

The eco-experiment that's soon to get going in the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes isn't happening anywhere else in the world, but it hopes to create a benchmark that might be used everywhere, at least everywhere there's underground oil contamination.

The dunes have plenty of that, though not as much as it once did, thanks to Unocal's ongoing efforts to dig up subterranean pools of oil that once leaked from a vast web of the company's buried pipelines.

Trouble is, you can't dig all the pollution up.

So how do you remove what's left behind, the stuff floating atop the water table? And how do you put once-pristine sand dunes back together again after it's been ripped apart by heavy equipment? As it turns out, the answer to both questions might be the same. You plant trees such as willows and cottonwoods, plants with roots that reach the water table, "phyreatophytes" to the botanists of the world, vegetation that actually eats up underground oil contamination.

Due to the brain trust at Cal Poly's biological sciences department, we now have a theoretical good thing with a long name, "phytoremediation," the use of plants such as willows to get rid of oil production.

If the trees work their magic, it could prove to be a cheap, low-tech solution to a modern by-product of the industrial revolution.

It'll be a few years before it can be called a success of a failure.

This fall, professors at Cal Poly will be handed as many as nine acres in the dunes for a science experiment that's got a whole department excited.

"If this works, it will set standards for what will occur elsewhere in the world," said Poly professor and department chair V.L. Holland.