Snowy Plovers' new digs

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GUADALUPE – Plovers, apparently, prefer man-made dunes.

At least that's what a Unocal-hired contract scientist said Wednesday while showing off 17 acres of dune habitat the company has created for the threatened Western snowy plover.

It's an effort to repair the damage done by the oil company for years, when diluent seepage 20 feet below the surface threatened the ocean and the Santa Maria River estuary. The Regional Water Quality Control Board ordered the company to remove 380,000 cubic yards of sand over 14 acres of contaminated soil in 1994.

Remediation of the dunes and seashore is complete. But Unocal still has 270,000 cubic yards of soil east of the dunes to clean up.

Tom Jordan, a contract environmental scientist with Unocal since 1994, said data indicates the plovers favor dunes created by Unocal for their nesting.

Jordan said of the 62 total nests identified this year, 13 were in the restored dunes. The bulk of them were on the seashore, the usual habitat for plovers, and the rest were in other places such as oil well pads and roads.

The remarkable thing, said Jordan, is that the nests in the sculpted dunes have a hatch rate of 77 percent vs. 35 percent for the entire survey area. The hatch rate measures the percentage of nests that yield live plovers.

Jordan said the plovers' success in [the] dunes was "a shock to everyone."

"They (tend to) like the beach and the flatter areas," he said. "On top of the dunes… they're above, so they can look out for predators." When adult plovers are startled, they abandon their eggs, he said.

What also helps attract the plovers are the hundreds of straw plugs workers stuck into the dunes, said Jordan. The dried bunches of straw, placed every 12 inches or so, serve as a windbreak, he said. Windbreaks and good lookouts meant the plovers' eggs stayed warm, which is required for hatching.

The plugs also serve as secure, nurturing environments in which seeds can germinate. Jordan and his team drop seeds of native plants on each plug in hopes of re-introducing them to the ecosystem.

The giant pile of contaminated soil sitting behind the sculpted dunes about 200 yards away serves as a reminder of Unocal's past transgression. An environmental impact report and statement are being put together to determine the fate of the sand. It will either be trucked to another location or cleaned on site, Jordan said.

He said he's happy the cleanup of the seashore and dunes is over.

"We're finally starting to shift to restoration," he said. "Now there are better returns and dividends."