

Unocal Buys Guadalupe Oil Field – Polluted site to be nature preserve

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Unocal Corp. has purchased the ecologically important but polluted Guadalupe oil field.

The oil company announced the purchase of the 2,704-acre site in the southwestern corner of San Luis Obispo County on Friday from the Leroy Family Trust. The price was not revealed.

The acquisition means that the parcel will be forever preserved, said Gonzalo Garcia, Unocal project manager at the site.

Under a settlement reached in the late 1990s, Unocal agreed to try to buy the site – a small portion is in the northern Santa Barbara County – and give up development rights when the purchase was complete.

“This purchase will enable us to dedicate a sitewide conservation easement over the property.”

The easement prohibits any kind of development or further oil extraction and limits grazing to activities that help habitat restoration. Unocal is allowed to continue its cleanup activities at the site.

Conservationists hailed the purchase as an important step in preserving the scarce and fragile Guadalupe-Nipomo dunes ecosystem. Property to the north and south of the oil field has already been preserved.

“I think in many ways it (the oil field) is one of the finest pieces of dune habitat we have,” said Liz Scott-Graham with the Dunes Center in Guadalupe. “A lot of the vegetation is in really good shape.”

The conservation easement will be held by a public agency or nonprofit group approved by San Luis Obispo County and the State Coastal Commission.

The oil field remains heavily polluted, and public access is limited to beach areas, where cleanup work has already been completed.

For more than 50 years, Unocal leased the oil field where it pumped heavy Santa Maria crude oil from deep underground. A kerosene-like substance called diluent was used to thin the goeey oil as it was pumped out of the ground. Between 8.5 and 20 million gallons of the substance leaked into the field and settled in the sand in huge underground pools.

In 1998, Unocal agreed to pay \$43.8 million in penalties for the pollution it caused at the oil field.

It also agreed to develop ways to clean up the site without destroying its scarce habitat for endangered species such as the red-legged frog and snowy plovers.

The oil company developed a bioremediation program in which polluted sand from near the Santa Maria River was dug up, and the diluent was allowed to naturally decompose.

However, this method failed to clean up the sand to the point it could be used as backfill.

Cleanup work was stopped a year ago, and county planners are having a supplemental environmental report written that will outline other options for cleaning up the sand.

Those include hauling it by truck or rail to a disposal site, injecting the sand in a water slurry back into the underground oil formation and washing or burning the sand to remove pollution.

The supplemental environmental report is due next summer.