

Guadalupe Excavation Halted

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Excavating contaminated sand from the Guadalupe Oil Fields has stopped, but work on how to treat the sand and what to do with it once the cleanup project is finished is moving ahead.

Earlier this month, the county approved a contract with MRS Environmental Inc. to prepare a supplemental environmental impact report for the Unocal remediation project and subsequent disposal of the more than 600,000 cubic yards of contaminated sand.

It will take about 18 months for the SEIR and the public hearing process to be completed, according to Gonzalo Garcia, project manager.

"It's going to take another two to four years to get the rest of it cleaned up," Garcia said, adding additional permits will be needed to do more excavation after the SEIR is certified.

Garcia said about 360,000 cubic yards of sand have been excavated and are being stored on site but away from the wetlands. The large mountain of sand has been sealed, treated with "soil cement," and Unocal is waiting to get the green light to dispose of it.

The SEIR will address newly identified treatment and disposal methods for the excavated plumes and sumps of diluent at the site of a former Unocal oil field. Diluent is a petroleum-based substance that was used to dilute the thick crude oil found at the field to make it easier to pump.

Over the years, diluent leached from pipes at several areas throughout the field, which was operated by other oil companies prior to Unocal taking over.

Unocal prefers treating diluent-affected sand and soil on site and then using it [as] a backfill for a cleanup project area. The process includes injecting contaminated sand or soil with bacteria that will then eat away the oil, according to Garcia.

Once treated, the clean soil would be used as backfill to create a new dune that would then be vegetated.

But Garcia said the idea of treating the sand on site and using it as backfill in the Guadalupe Dunes is raising the hackles of some because final treatment levels for the material haven't been established.

Because the Guadalupe Dunes is an ecologically sensitive area, not many are embracing the oil company's preferred remediation method.

"There's been a lot of reluctance to do that because of the environmentally sensitive area out here," Garcia said, adding that several alternatives will be examined in the SEIR.

He also said the treatment could still possibly be done, just away from the wetlands to cut down on any environmental damage or degradation the process may entail.

The area where the excavated sand is presently being stored is a dry, paved area one-quarter of a mile inland and away from the wetlands. Drainage is also contained.

The SEIR will also examine trucking the contaminated material off site to a solid waste facility, such as the Santa Maria Landfill.

"That would be a win-win situation," Garcia said. "It gets rid of the risk on site, and it also helps with the closure plan (at the landfill)."

The SEIR will also look at treating the sand through thermal desorption, where the affected material is treated with heat to vaporize the hydrocarbons.

Unocal will pay for the SEIR, which Garcia said will likely cost between \$500,000 and \$700,000.

The project's original environmental impact report that was certified by the county in 1998 cost Unocal more than \$1 million. That document evaluated and determined mitigation measures for remedial actions, including excavation of diluent plumes and treatment methods for the excavated material.