

Parties hammer out details for protocol of cleanup's second phase at the dunes

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The first phase of the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes cleanup is under way, with transportation of contaminated sand from the work site to its final resting place in the Santa Maria Regional Landfill.

But this is just the beginning of the cleanup effort that eventually will see the nearly 3,000 acres of dunes, owned by Chevron, turned over to public use.

Officials with the oil company and the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board are in discussions over what the second phase of the cleanup will look like, along with how to get the information out to the public.

After the uproar over the transportation of Phase I sand, both groups want to make sure people can have their say on Phase II.

Some Santa Barbara County residents have vocally disapproved of the process for Phase I, in which tons of contaminated sand is trucked from the cleanup site in San Luis Obispo County to the disposal site in Santa Maria.

A group of Santa Maria residents appealed the decision to allow the transportation of the sand to both the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors and the California Coastal Commission. The group claimed there was not adequate information given or enough public input from Santa Barbara County residents about the project.

Officials note that meetings were held throughout the process but they were poorly attended.

"It's really a shame that people feel (like they were left out)," said Diane Kukol with the RWQCB. "The fact that they do feel that way means that we should do better."

She added it was never the intention to keep people in the dark.

For Phase I, trucks are rolling, in a highly calculated fashion, out of the dunes and taking up to 18.5 tons of sand at a time to the landfill east of Santa Maria.

While crews work to remove the half-million tons of sand sitting on the site in a stockpile, excavation of more sand is expected to begin soon, which could see another quarter-million tons of sand removed, officials say.

The dunes site is contaminated with diluent, a petroleum product similar to kerosene or diesel that was first brought in the 1950s through pipelines to the oil wells to help pump out thick oil, said Gonzalo Garcia, with Chevron Environmental Management Co.

Garcia has been working at the dunes cleanup for 13 years.

Corrosion began and leaks developed in the pipes, which were on the surface of the sand, and eventually the diluent was able to reach what is called the Dune Sand Aquifer, Garcia said. This aquifer lies below the dunes but on top of a roughly 150 foot layer of clay that further separates groundwater.

For one reason or another, the leaks were not immediately found or reported, he said.

“(There’s) nothing to excuse the practices back then,” Garcia said. “You cannot pardon what happened out here.”

Over the course of the cleanup, the working relationship between the state oversight agency and the oil company has vastly improved, Kukol said. She noted that the company is also being proactive about some aspects of the project.

The cleanup of the dunes began in the early 1990s, but was accelerated in 1998 when, through beach erosion, one of the diluent plumes broke through and began flowing into the ocean, Garcia said.

At that point, the company received a cleanup order from the RWQCB, Garcia said, and the company was ordered to remove contamination anywhere that posed a great risk to surface water such as the ocean, ponds or the Santa Maria River.

That project comprises Phase I and deals with 20 to 25 of the plumes. There are 90 plumes total, but some are not an immediate threat to surface water and will be dealt with in Phase II, Garcia said.

Officials have not yet determined the cleanup techniques for Phase II. Once the details of the second phase are determined, another environmental review is likely to occur, Garcia said.

There is a range of alternatives for Phase II, including further excavation or the use of natural attenuation, which allows natural bacteria in the area to digest the contaminants, Garcia said.

Natural attenuation has the least environmental impact, but takes the most time, Garcia said. In places where natural attenuation was used, the bacteria digested about 90 to 160 gallons of diluent a year.

Excavation was chosen as a quick fix for the highest priority sites.

All options have pros and cons, but it will be up to the water board to decide, Garcia said.

“The public should have a say in what the long term solution is,” Garcia said, adding that those thoughts should be expressed to the regional water board.

There may be a variety of techniques for the second phase of cleanup as opposed to just one, Kukol said.

She noted that meetings will be held for Phase II not only in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act but there may also be workshops, and people can always speak during public comment at water board meetings.

A water board decision on the cleanup direction Phase II could come in late 2007, Kukol said.

“(But there is) a lot to consider and we don’t want to be hasty or miss something,” she said.

Once the site is cleaned, the oil company intends to sign conservation easements that will make it part of the overall dunes preserve, Garcia said. He added that the restoration project will also create an additional 20 acres of new wetlands.

The area houses ancient Chumash sites, great ocean views and a host of endangered animal and plant life.

“When we’re done with the cleanup, this site will be second to none,” Garcia said.

Gillian Andrews, executive director of the Dunes Center, described the Chevron property as a vital piece of the dunes complex, adding that center officials are “thrilled to be part of the visioning” process.