

Guadalupe Dunes - Dunes' spills focus of cleanup

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On the surface, the dunes that dominate this stark and beautiful landscape remain as majestic as when Cecil B. DeMille filmed "The Ten Commandments" here in 1923.

Venture across the Guadalupe Dunes in southern San Luis Obispo County and you'll find frog-filled marshes, nesting grounds for endangered shorebirds and the rarest flowering plants in California.

But looks can be deceiving. Under the surface, the dunes hide a major oil-industry disaster. Starting in the 1950s, the oil giant Unocal carelessly leaked up to 18 million gallons of petroleum under this sensitive landscape, the largest oil spill in California's history.

To many, the Guadalupe spill typifies everything that is wrong with fossil fuels. To others, it typifies everything right with California's coastal protection laws, the strongest in the nation.

Fined \$44 million and threatened with jail time, Unocal officials have been working to clean up the 2,700-acre site since 1994. They have ripped out pipelines that once scarred the landscape, replanted vegetation and excavated 360,000 cubic yards of contaminated sand.

Even Unocal's harshest critics can't help but marvel. "The transformation of the Guadalupe Dunes is nothing less than miraculous," says Mark Massara, a Sierra Club lawyer who once hounded the company over its spills.

Unocal's troubles started soon after it purchased the Guadalupe oil field in the 1950's. Engineers built 145 miles of pipelines across the dunes to carry a diesel-like substance, known as diluent, to help pump the thick crude out of the earth. Over the years, the pipelines rusted and became buried in the shifting sands, where they sprang leaks in at least 90 places.

By the late 1980s, surfers were complaining about a mysterious sheen in the nearby ocean, and sea lions and seals started washing up dead. Unocal initially denied any problems, but then, acting on a tip, state fish and game officers raided the company's offices in 1992, carting away 20 boxes of records.

Those records showed Unocal officials had long known about the spills, which by then had spread so far underground they were seeping into the Pacific Ocean and the nearby Santa Maria River.

Environmentalists wanted jail time for the Unocal officials. Instead, the company got probation and paid \$44 million in fines and damages to the state.

Six state and federal agencies now oversee Unocal's cleanup. Instead of pumping oil at Guadalupe, a staff of 20 Unocal biologists and engineers work on the cleanup there, headed by an environmental specialist named Gonzalo Garcia.

Lanky and affable, Garcia has a daunting task – to simultaneously restore the environment and repair Unocal's public image.

His team has stanching the worst of the underground spills. It also is testing ways of detoxifying a mountain of excavated soil that was dug from the beach and other sites.

"What makes this tricky is this is one of the most sensitive ecological sites in the state," says Garcia. Excavating everything, he says, would effectively destroy the dunes everyone wants to save.

Over the long run, Unocal officials hope that natural microbes and man-made cleanup will remove and break down the subsurface contamination, and prevent any exposure to the area's 300 species of wildlife.

Garcia – who wears a Unocal sweat shirt that reads "Concluding our activities in a responsible way" – says the healing process will take a long time.

"I tell people, 'Don't trust us, watch us,'" he said. "Watch what we do."