

Guadalupe Oil Field May have New Life

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Unocal Corp. is negotiating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to dedicate a conservation easement on the 2,000-acre Guadalupe oil field.

Last week, the oil company recorded an irrevocable offer to dedicate the land in the southwest corner of San Luis Obispo County to a public trust group.

If the federal government accepts the easement, it will be managed as part of the Guadalupe-Nipomo National Wildlife Refuge.

The site is polluted by millions of gallons of a crude-oil thinner, called diluent, which leaked from faulty pipes.

Unocal is decontaminating tainted sand removed in various cleanup digs and is experimenting with ways to clean up the bulk of the pollution, which lies underground.

This work will continue, but no other development will be allowed. And grazing will be limited to habitat restoration.

Although polluted, the oil field contains important coastal dunes habitat that is home to red-legged frogs, snowy plovers and a rare thistle plant.

Dune areas to the north and south are largely in public ownership.

Conservation of the oil field will be an additional step in conserving the dunes complex.

Unocal leased the property for 50 years and operated it as an oil field until the pollution was discovered in the 1990s.

As part of the settlement with the county and [the] state Coastal Commission, the oil company bought the property in 2002.

The settlement also required Unocal to dedicate a conservation easement that will protect the property in perpetuity.