

Guadalupe Dunes cleanup to begin

The Tribune: February 8, 2006

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The county Board of Supervisors gave the go-ahead Tuesday to a massive beach cleanup project that has been years in the making.

The cleanup will move 860,000 cubic yards of polluted sand and soil from the Guadalupe Dunes, which is mostly in San Luis Obispo County, to a Santa Maria landfill in Santa Barbara County.

Supervisors turned down a request by Dan Kirk and others in Santa Maria to delay the project. Kirk said Santa Barbara County residents had not received proper public notice.

The county staff, however, outlined numerous examples of when the public in both counties were told of the move. Santa Maria Mayor Larry Lavagnino backed them up. The city of Santa Maria supports the move, he said.

Gonzalo F. Garcia, operations team manager for Unocal Corp., which operates the site, said Unocal hopes to begin moving the soil by May 1. If Kirk appeals to the state Coastal Commission, as he threatened to do, that would delay the operation further.

The removal would put up to 300 trucks a day on the 16 miles of road between the dunes and the landfill for two to four years. County planners estimate the total number of trips over the life of the project at 47,779.

The San Luis Obispo Planning Commission approved the shipments July 28.

The shipment would be the final phase of a cleanup that began in the mid-1990s at the 2,700-acre Guadalupe Oil Field. From 1946 to 1994 the site produced oil and natural gas. In the 1950s, oil producers began to use a hydrocarbon called diluent to thin heavy crude oil.

Over the decades, diluent leaked from storage tanks and pipelines into the sand, soil and groundwater. It threatened to pollute the Santa Maria River, the Pacific Ocean and the aquifer under the Santa Maria Valley.

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 a settlement with the county and state Coastal Commission, the oil company bought the property in 2002.

Since the late 1990s, Unocal and a committee that includes the Department of Fish & Game and the Coastal Commission, among others, have been trying to find ways to get rid of the contaminated soil and sand.

Should the shipment go forward, the soil will be used as part of a process designed to cap the Santa Maria landfill to prevent rainwater from carrying its pollutants into the groundwater beneath the dump.