

Water disposal may be avoided at GI dump

A controversial plan to treat and dispose of wastewater in the ponds of the former geothermal waste dump on Butts Canyon Road may not be necessary, and three of the ponds have already been closed and capped.

Work is also expected to begin soon on a wetland between the ponds and Butts Canyon Road. The wetlands will replace wildlife habitat lost in construction of earthwork for the project.

The original plan called for treating the liquid waste and disposing of it in an existing drainage canal that runs into Long Valley and is part of the Putah Creek drainage. Some local residents and agencies were concerned about the disposal plan, even though the water will be highly treated and only disposed of in dry weather.

Now a consultant on the project has come up with an innovative idea for eliminating the liquid waste by evaporation, according to David Harnish, environmental scientist for PG&E. If the evaporation plan works, treatment and disposal would not be necessary.

However, PG&E plans to still obtain a discharge permit from the state Regional Water Quality Control Board in case treatment

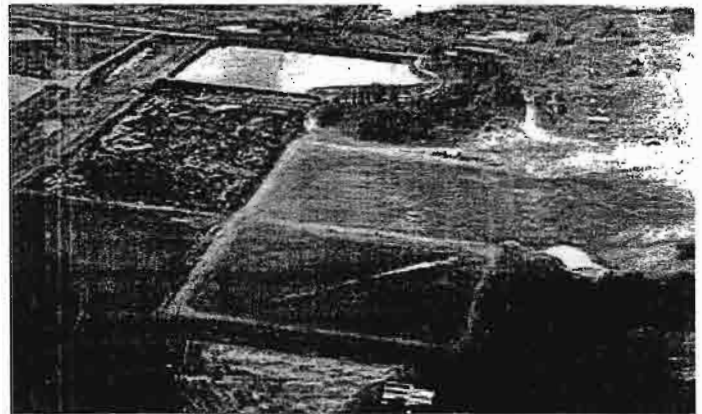
and discharge is necessary to eliminate liquid wastes in the pond.

That discharge permit was the subject of some discussion last year because of requirements the cleanup entities thought were too stringent. Harnish said both sides have reached a "reasonable accommodation" to address issues of cost and benefit.

PG&E is the lead agency on the project, is funded by all the geothermal companies that sent waste to the Geothermal Inc. (GI) facility from 1976 to 1987. The dump was closed when the county revoked its use permit in 1987 and the company declared bankruptcy.

The seven ponds have sat idle ever since, with groundwater conditions monitored by the county and the responsible entities. After much study, a plan to clean up the site was approved and work began last year.

Two ponds were already empty when the project began. Water from ponds 5, 6 and 7 was reduced by evaporation, and the remaining water moved to pond 4. Solid waste was removed from pond 7 to pond 6, which was temporarily covered with soil. Pond 5 did not contain any waste and was dried and filled with clean



Three ponds have been filled in at the GI dump on Butts Canyon Road (foreground and right) and the plan now is to try to dispose of the water in the two ponds on the left by evaporation.

soil. The area of the three ponds was graded so surface water would not seep in.

Work now begins to remove liquid wastes from ponds 1 and 4. If the evaporation plan works, solid waste will be moved into pond 4, which will be capped so water cannot enter it. Eventually the whole area will be planted with trees and grass. Eucalyptus trees were chosen because they suck up lots of water and will help keep the groundwater table from reaching the bottom of the ponds.

The level of the adjacent Freeman Lake will also be lowered to keep the water table down. The concrete weir on the spillway has already been notched to lower the water level by 5 feet, and further work is needed to lower the lake another 5 feet, Harnish said.

Also scheduled for this year was construction of a road from the rear of the dump to Guenoc to haul in additional materials for filling the ponds. That plan was also not popular with neighbors or county agencies, and the plan is on hold.

Harnish said they will wait to see whether additional fill is needed before deciding whether to construct another road or use Butts Canyon Road.

Neighbors can expect to see equipment being mobilized on the site this month, and next month construction should begin

on the evaporation system.

"By fall we will look at the water quantities remaining in the ponds and decide if we need the water treatment system," Harnish said.

A newsletter to update interested parties will be mailed next month, and another public meeting is set for June at the Calpine Visitor Center in Middletown.