

Environment

A-2 — Thursday, Nov. 29, 1990 — Santa Cruz Sentinel

Creek has new lease on life

Carbonero cleanup called successful three months after gasoline spill

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SCOTTS VALLEY — Three months ago, Carbonero Creek was deluged with 4,300 gallons of unleaded gasoline after a tanker truck crashed on Highway 17.

But today the creek is almost back to normal, thanks to an eight-week cleanup effort overseen by a variety of state and county agencies.

The spill immediately killed all marine life along one mile of the creek, but live fish recently released in the area are now "swimming around happy as clams," said environmental consultant Roy Kiser, of Pilko Associates. "Live fish testing is a pretty good indication that the creek is coming back into equilibrium."

A final water and soil analysis is now being reviewed by the county Environmental Health Department and the state Regional Water Quality Control Board, but several earlier tests showed

"no detectable levels" of gasoline in the creek water, according to county environmental health specialist Stephen Baiocchi.

"We're still advising people not to drink water out of the creek until we review the final report," Baiocchi said. "I believe there are still three or four families out there who take their drinking water out of the creek."

Families relying on creek water have been supplied with free bottled water since the spill, and one resident whose irrigation pond relies on creek water has had his pond replenished with trucked-in fresh water.

The retail value of the gasoline spilled on August 28 was about \$5,000, but the cost of cleaning up the mess will cost more than \$500,000, Kiser said. The entire cleanup cost, in addition to possible criminal penalties, will be paid by the tanker owner, Petroleum Delivery Inc. of San Jose.

PDI hired Pilko Associates of Woodland Hills to design and oversee the cleanup, and NG Chemical of Santa Maria to do the work. Much of the heavy labor was provided by young men from the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp.

"In our opinion, we've done just about everything we could possibly do to bring the creek to its original condition," Kiser said. "We pumped it and skimmed it, we used absorbent pads and booms, we flushed it with fresh water and we aerated it (with bubbling air hoses) to get the hydrocarbons out."

In addition, workers excavated about 400 cubic yards of contaminated soil and carried it out of the steep creek bed by hand. The contaminated water was taken to a recycler who extracted the gasoline, and the soil was taken to a hazardous waste dump.

Workers then seeded, planted and installed erosion control mesh on large areas of creek bed, Kiser said. The restoration work was completed by Oct. 27, he said, but lab work and writing the final report took until Wednesday, when the report was submitted to the county. County officials will need at least a week to review the report, Baiocchi said.

Despite the cost and care expended on the cleanup, Carbonero Creek will feel the effects of the spill for some time to come. Area resident Tom Higgins took a walk down the creek shortly after Sunday's rain, and noticed a strong smell of gasoline.

"There was a pretty good flow in the creek, and the gasoline smell was there again," he said. "The rain just washed it out of the soil. It's going to take a while before it all gets flushed out of there."