

New system proposed to cut methane

\$3 million fix sought at landfill

Los Angeles Daily News, by Kerry Cavanaugh

Saturday, July 23, 2005 - SUN VALLEY -- Los Angeles officials are betting that a \$3 million fix at the defunct Sheldon-Arleta Landfill will alleviate a long-standing methane gas problem at Francis Polytechnic High School and save millions of dollars' worth of water each year.

For more than a decade, water officials have sent storm runoff to the ocean. Prior to that, the water was pumped into the Tujunga spreading grounds, where it percolated underground, displacing methane gas from the decomposing trash and sending it wafting over the school and neighboring homes.

Los Angeles officials hope to install a methane-control system at the landfill that could suck up to three times as much methane and toxic landfill gas as the current system, and prevent gas from moving off-site.

The stronger system is needed to handle methane movement expected as the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power attempts to triple the amount of water it captures at the Tujunga spreading grounds.

"We think that restoring the historic capacity at the Tujunga spreading grounds is one of the best bangs for the buck," said Mark Mackowski, water master for the San Fernando Valley basin.

"At \$3 million, that's a bargain compared to the water we lost this season. We probably lose more than \$3 million in water."

The 188-acre spreading grounds is a group of ponds that allow water to soak through the soil into the San Fernando Valley groundwater basin, which supplies roughly 15 percent of Los Angeles' drinking water.

The Valley basin has seen a troubling 20-year decline in groundwater levels, and water officials say fixing spreading grounds is the most efficient way to reverse that trend.

Because filling the Tujunga ponds causes methane problems at the school, water managers have only been able to utilize about 25 percent of the spreading ground capacity.

DWP officials hope the new system will allow them to save up to 2,000 gallons of water per second that would otherwise flow to the ocean.

"We want to be able to get back up to that full capacity so when we have wet years like this we can catch the full capacity," said Richard Harasick, assistant director of DWP water resources.

Over at Poly High, Los Angeles Unified School District officials said they have concerns that the increased water spreading will again push methane on campus, and will closely watch the new project.

"We're going to make sure they're going to do their due diligence. We want them to assure us that the system will not have an impact on the school," said Pat Schanen, deputy director of the district's Office of Environmental Health and Safety.

The Bureau of Sanitation is expected to seek bids on the new methane system this summer. The project, which is being funded by the DWP, will cost about \$2.75 million. Construction will take up to two years.

The project includes removing all of the existing gas extraction wells and pipelines -- many of which do not work -- and burying the new wells and pipelines underground to accommodate a sports park proposed by Councilman Tony Cardenas.

The new methane control system should be more efficient, giving inspectors more accurate information on methane movement and allowing them to quickly vacuum up methane in problem areas, said Kelly Gharios, assistant division manager for the bureau.

Melanie Winter, with The River Project and the Tujunga Watershed Plan, said the new methane system will help replenish the Valley's "dangerously depleted" groundwater basin by using local water.

"We've got a free local water supply rather than a very costly imported water supply. This is something that should be a priority for us."