

Central Valley board allows wastewater disposal to continue despite contamination

Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times, 7-31-15

Despite a finding that unlined wastewater pits near Kern County's Edison oil field have contaminated groundwater, officials on Thursday delayed shutting down some operations.

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board ignored its own staff recommendation and voted to let Valley Water Management Co. continue disposing of excess wastewater by spraying it on hillsides for another 2 1/2 years.

The company takes in nearly half a million gallons of oil field wastewater each day for dozens of drillers in the region. The cheapest way to dispose of it is in long, narrow pits gouged in the ground. Most of the wastewater evaporates or seeps into the dirt.

But Valley Water's operations include an unorthodox method: "irrigation" using high-powered sprinklers.

The board's staff report cited high levels of salt and boron accumulated in the unpermitted spray field, which could make its way into nearby Cottonwood Creek and eventually the Kern River. It recommended Valley Water be ordered to cease the practice by Aug. 15.

But Thursday's vote gave the company until January 2018 to come into full compliance. It must, however, meet a series of deadlines that require more comprehensive water quality analysis beginning in October 2015, something Valley Water argued was unnecessary.

Because drilling operations in California bring up much more water than oil, energy companies struggle to dispose of the liquid, which may contain drilling fluids as well as naturally present salts and other compounds found in the ground, such as arsenic.

When the wastewater is sprayed onto hillsides, sustained rain or storms could carry the contaminated runoff into adjacent fields, damaging crops and soil, staff members said.

Clay Rodgers, assistant executive officer of the water board's Fresno office, argued Thursday that the spray field should be shut down immediately and told the board that the company's 27 waste pits in the Race Track Hill area were the source of "significant" contamination.

"This is basically pure wastewater in groundwater," he said.

According to Rodgers, consultants hired by Valley Water concluded that five of six water-monitoring wells in the 94-acre waste site had registered significantly high levels of salt, boron and chloride.

The company's experts, however, disputed how far the contaminated plume of water had traveled and whether what they called its slow progression represented an imminent threat.

The company has been operating the facility — along with another disposal site— for 58 years. Valley Water was advised in the 1990s to halt spraying operations, but it was not until 2013 that the regional water board began to clamp down.

Rodgers acknowledged that the water board staff had failed for decades to properly regulate the sites, but urged board members to take immediate action.

"Yes, this problem has been going on a long time," he said. "I'll be the first to tell you that I am not a happy camper that it went on as long as it did."

But the board appeared to be persuaded by testimony Thursday that an aggressive compliance timeline would cause undue economic hardship on small oil producers.

Various industry representatives told the board that if the spray field were closed, the effects would be "economically devastating."

The spray process disposes of up to 50% of the daily wastewater received by Valley Water, according to the company; cutting by half the amount of water they could store would reduce oil production among the companies that rely on its facilities.

The use of unlined pits has come under fire, with a recent scientific report prepared for the state Legislature concluding that they were likely to contaminate groundwater and calling for them to be phased out.