

KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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DEC. 2017

SESPE OILFIELD TO SEE MAJOR EXPANSION

In 1982, an aquifer exemption was granted for the injection of toxic wastewater from oil facilities in the Sespe Oilfield north of Fillmore, into the Basal Sespe aquifer, several thousands of feet under-ground.

The 1982 exempt aquifer area – meaning exempt from the groundwater protections of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act – is around one half of the size of the area that is now up for approval by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), based on DOGGR's application. (DOGGR is the California state regulator of the petroleum industry; the full name is the Dept. of Conservation's Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources.)

In 1982, there were five distinct areas in the Sespe Oilfield that were approved for the injection of toxic drilling wastes underground.

In 2012 Seneca Resources, the current operator of almost all the Sespe Oilfield, asked DOGGR to approve three wells in the Sespe Oilfield, which are situated west of and *outside of* the 1982 exempt areas, for injecting wastewater underground. DOGGR signed off on this request over the next year, although approving injection wells into aquifers protected by the Safe Drinking Water Act is illegal.

This was not a new situation. In 2015 the Associated Press ran a story about DOGGR approving - more than 2,500 times - the injection of toxic oilfield wastewater into California's federally-protected aquifers. It would appear that DOGGR functions more as an accommodator and facilitator for the oil industry, rather than as the California State oil industry regulator for the public good.

Before DOGGR now is their answer to fixing the matter of their approval five years ago of those three Seneca wells injecting wastewater into a federally-protected drinking water aquifer – by expanding the area where injection is permitted.

The record shows that the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, back in June 2016, reminded DOGGR that those three wells had been injecting into protected aquifers for several years.

Under DOGGR's own rules, from their settlement with the EPA over the matter of DOGGR's allowing toxic wastewater injection into aquifers over 2,500 times, all wastewater injection into non-exempt (protected) aquifers was required to cease by Feb.15, 2017.

Did DOGGR make Seneca stop injecting at those three wells in February? No, apparently they did not. Records indicate that they are still injecting at all those wells.

And for some reason, the State Water Resources Control Board is now on board with DOGGR & Seneca's current exempt aquifer expansion proposal. They now say the Basal Sespe aquifer is classified as petroleum-bearing, not water that could be of drinking quality.

What is clear is that nothing has changed in the Sespe Aquifer since 1982. What has changed is simply the wording that bureaucrats sitting in offices have used on documents describing the aquifer's contents.

Bear in mind that this doubling in size of the exempt aquifer in the Sespe Oilfield will allow Seneca to apply to drill as many new injection wells as they desire over the indefinite future. There is no reason whatsoever to double the exempt aquifer area of the Sespe Oilfield, unless Seneca has plans to initiate a similar massive expansion of oil well drilling up there.

THE SAN CAYETANO FAULT

Then there is the matter of the active San Cayetano fault, which crosses Sespe Creek east to west, halfway between the Sespe Oilfield and Fillmore's water supply basin.

Its last major jolt was likely in 1812, when the ground surface shifted at least 4.3 meters in a quake measuring 7.5 on the Richter Scale. [Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America, vol. 91, number 6, Dec. 2001].

Why would DOGGR's maps for this proposal neglect to portray the San Cayetano fault? Would it be good science to omit a faultline such as the

San Andreas from a map of proposed oilfield operations only a mile away? If not, then what explanation can there be for this omission in DOGGR's proposal?

Back in 2006, an injection well casing in the Upper Ojai Valley sprang an enormous leak, leading to the

release of toxic wastewater at the rate of around 2 million gallons per week. Apparently it took the oil field operators three months of 24 hours a day work to plug this well casing breach, which also required the assistance of an international expert in emergency leak plugging.

What might happen to oil well casings, should the San Cayetano fault shift again in a major quake, barely a mile from the edge of the Sespe Oilfield with its hundreds of wells?

There would likely be multiple breached well casings, and the potential for multiple major spills of oil and of wastewater, both at the surface and at different levels below ground, leaking into other aquifers and surface waters. There are still hundreds of oil wells in the Sespe Oilfield. The damaged wells might take years and enormous sums of money to plug, which might even require the complete closure of the Sespe Oilfield.

After a major earthquake there, powerlines would likely be down in the Sespe Oilfield, causing the emergency shut-off equipment to be non-operational. What is more, the one pipeline that carries oil from the Sespe Oilfield to refineries would rupture where it crosses the San Cayetano fault, leading to an enormous quantity of oil pouring out of the ground and running straight downhill into both Sespe Creek and Fillmore's aquifer.

All this at a time of an unfolding natural disaster when emergency services would be stretched thin, and equipment access to attempt to plug the leaking oil pipe-line might well be closed off.

DOGGR's only reference to geology in its recent documentation dated back to 1954.

SEspe CREEK'S NATURAL SEEPS IN THE LOWER GORGE

Sespe Creek has many natural oil seeps along its east bank, adjacent to and downhill from the Sespe Oilfield. The Sespe Gorge here is around 1,000 feet deep. These oil seeps, which have never been tested, demonstrate that underground oil and water in this area can and do reach the surface. DOGGR's Basal Sespe Aquifer Exemption Application shows that the Basal Sespe formation, where the waste-water is to be injected, actually reaches the surface at a point very close to Sespe Creek.

KSWC plans, starting in 2018, to sample several of these lower Sespe Gorge seeps, and have them analyzed in a lab, to see if they contain chemicals used in the Sespe Oilfield, including fracking compounds. It has been stated that all of the oil wells in the Sespe

Oilfield have been subject to fracking at some point in recent decades, dating back to when the practice and potential risks of fracking had not yet come to the public's attention. No such tests have been performed before.

WHY KSWC OPPOSES THE SESPE OILFIELD EXEMPT-AQUIFER EXPANSION

KSWC is working on this issue locally with CFROG, (Citizens for Responsible Oil & Gas), Los Padres Forest Watch and others. The City of Fillmore has opposed the expansion, out of concern for the safety of the aquifer their citizens and local farmers depend on. It's their only water source.

Here are the reasons to be concerned about this doubling of the exempt aquifer area in the Sespe Oilfield:

- (1) The only reason to expand the potential for the injection of toxic wastewater is that the oil operator, Seneca, is also planning a major expansion of new oil well drilling up there - which will also mean more fracking.
- (2) DOGGR's analysis states that the injected wastewater is only "expected" to stay in place. There is no guarantee that the geologic barriers underground are impervious to the movement of fluids.
- (3) All oil well casings may leak at some point, and there have been a number of pipeline leaks in the Sespe Oilfield recently. More oil operations there increases the risk of further leaks and spills.
- (4) The Basal Sespe aquifer meets the EPA's definition of a protected drinking water source (though this water is mixed with oil, it could be cleaned for future human use, under EPA regulations).
- (5) At this point in time, with rampant climate change, oil production should be curtailed rather than expanded.
- (6) DOGGR completely ignored the active San Cayetano fault, and its dangerously disruptive potential in the Sespe Oilfield.
- (7) Fillmore's only water supply comes from the aquifer beneath the lower Sespe and the city; polluting it with oilfield chemicals would be disastrous. The aquifer is only one mile downhill from the edge of the oilfield.

PLEASE SEND US A DONATION!

All of KSWC's expenses are covered by your donations. Please send us a check in the enclosed remit envelope – or mail it to us at:

KSWC, PO Box 715, Ojai, Ca. 93024

Thanks to all who've contributed this past year, particularly to those who are regular donors.

We remain very grateful for the support you send.



The pool below the Piedra Blanca trailhead in April 2017.

SESPE HOTSPRINGS FEATURED IN THE MANSON FAMILY TRIAL

Since this horrific story is, perhaps for the last time, featured in the news currently, we thought it timely to recount what we know of this mysterious episode within the larger story.

Ronald Hughes was the trial attorney for Leslie van Houten. He had never taken a case to trial before. He had angered Manson during the trial, by proposing that his client was controlled by Manson. All the defendants claimed they were acting on their own, a tactic to allow Manson to deny any responsibility for the multiple murders.

Hughes, who was referred to as the “hippie lawyer”, took off on a camping trip on November 27, 1970, after six months of the trial, during a ten day recess granted by the judge to allow the attorneys to prepare their closing arguments. His destination - the Sespe Hotsprings.

At that point, one could drive there easily from Rose Valley on the approximately 15-mile dirt road that was graded each summer by the SeaBee crews who were based for many years at the work camp (now demolished) by the lake adjacent to the Rose Valley Road.

He reached Hotsprings Canyon, but was soon never seen alive again.

Rumours abounded that he had been murdered by the Manson family, and it was not until March of 1971 that his body was found, washed far down

Sespe Creek below the Hotsprings Canyon. At that point, it was far too late to determine the likely cause of his death.

Here we are able to add to the story that was known to the public, and indeed it would seem that Hughes' death was entirely accidental.

At that time, the heavy equipment that graded the road from Rose Valley was also generously used to construct a berm of dirt, sand and rocks to create a large, swimming pool sized pool of hot water near the source of the hotsprings. That must have been pretty nice!

Our late friend, Cary Sterling of Ojai, who dearly loved the Sespe – and was an unofficial historian of the watershed – was visiting the Sespe Hotsprings that same week. He found two things, which he reported to the police when he returned to town.

One, he found Hughes' clothes and gear, and since nobody came back for them, he looked for and found identification in the pockets.

Two, he saw that the berm forming the large pool had given way, releasing all of the water down Hotsprings Canyon. Maybe it happened after dark?

So it would seem that Hughes must have been enjoying the delightful hot water swimming pool when the berm had suddenly burst – or else, he was situated right below it - and he was washed downstream. Nobody will ever know if he drowned right away, or maybe his head was bashed against a rock and he was knocked unconscious, and was unable to come to the surface and try to survive.

Hotsprings Canyon flows for about a mile before it reaches Sespe Creek itself. If his body had initially been washed less distance than that, then surely it would have been found sooner. There must have been intense searching for him after he disappeared. So the hot water flood must have been large enough to carry him down to the Sespe, where winter stormflows may have continued to transport his body further downstream over the winter.

A happy KSWC volunteer enjoys the Sespe Hotsprings.



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THE POETRY OF FRANK FELT

Frank D. Felt moved for his health to a cabin near Chorro Grande Trail, in the upper Sespe, long before Hwy. 33 was built adjacent in the 1930's. Access was a trail down through Matilija Canyon. He wrote two short books of poetry, from his time there. This one was written on his first Thanksgiving there.

THANKSGIVING

Tis the day of thanksgiving,
And in fancy, I see
A festive board blest
With good-fellowship's glee;
There's the platter of plenty
That fortune may pass,
With a toast to the host,
And the clink of a glass.

But I eat my crust,
As I drink my tea
Neath the sheltering boughs
Of an oaken tree:
And my couch – the sod,
My roof - the sky,
Yet humble and thankful
O God! am I!

His introduction to this poem reads –

“I thought of folks at home and the many family dinners I could not attend because of the long trail, while the pack-bags offered little that might garnish my dinner cloth on such a day; yet, my health was improving and I was indeed very thankful.”

(More Frank Felt poetry in coming newsletters).