Meyers Landfill takes twice as long to cap, closure remains

By Kathryn Reed

It will never look like a pristine forest, but one day the old Meyers Landfill site on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe could be a place worth visiting.

For now, though, it's completely off-limits.

With nearly a third more debris found at the site than anticipated, the closure to the area remains in effect until at least through 2011. This is because the construction associated with getting the cap on the old dump is not done. Part of the area will remain closed for three years. At that time the U.S. Forest Service, the landowner, will decide what to do for the long term.

Intact garbage found this summer at the old Meyers Landfill. Photos/Gail Bakker

This information will given out to a sparsely attended Nov. 18

meeting at the Forest Service headquarters in South Lake Tahoe. That same day an extension to the closure was signed by acting Forest Supervisor Eli Ilano.

The heavy equipment at the site has been removed, with the remaining pieces to be out by the end of the weekend.

About 107,000 cubic yards of waste was consolidated into one area.

“We found a lot of bottles, pieces of metal, clothes, pieces of carpet, chunks of concrete,” Gail Bakker, USFS engineer and project leader, told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting.

Even readable newspaper remnants were found. And the area off Pioneer Trail near Elks Club Road has not been a dump since 1971. (It started as a landfill in 1947.)

This proves things don’t easily decompose, even with decades of rain and snow to help with the process.

Debris covering the South Tahoe Public Utility District line was removed so it can be accessed in the future. It won’t be covered by the cap. Soil samples were taken in that area – about 12 feet below the manhole. They turned up negative.

For now, a layer of soil covers the site. A French drain was also installed to collect subsurface drainage from neighboring slopes.

Next summer the black impermeable plastic cap will be installed.

“One reason we chose a thicker cap is because we knew people would be back there,” Dennis Geiser, engineer with the USFS regional office in Vallejo, said.

A drainage layer will be included, more soil and then native plant seedlings.

“We cannot allow deep-rooted plants because the liner is 3 feet from the surface,” Bakker said. If trees or shrubs sprout, they will be yanked out.

The entire disturbed area is more than 20 acres. However, the liner will cover 7 acres, with what’s called the plateau area encompassing another 4 acres.

There will always be restrictions on the use of site – no buildings, no wells.

What concerns Forest Service officials with snow on the ground is snowmobilers using the area during the temporary closure. A chain link fence is up around the inner most sensitive area, while the orange construction fencing is around the perimeter. More signs will go up soon.

But as the snow mounts that orange fence can disappear. Then, there are the people who don’t care and ride on through. Damaging the stormwater protection systems is the major concern, along with riders injuring themselves.

Law enforcement as well as forest protection officers will be in the area to educate people and cite violators when necessary.

Once the cap is in place, groundwater testing will be ongoing. The cap is designed to prevent further leaching of contaminants into the groundwater. Vinyl chloride is the main contaminant people are worried about. It is a breakdown component of solvents that had been dumped at the waste site.

If the cap is working, then the contaminated groundwater (there are no drinking wells are in the area) will dissipate. If it doesn’t work, this will be detected via the monitoring wells showing continued or increased levels of contaminants.

One plume is moving toward Saxon Creek, another toward Pioneer Trail.

With this being deemed a CERCLA (Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act) site per the Environmental Protection Agency, specific remediation measures had to be used. It took this long to begin construction of a cap because it took nearly 20 years and millions of dollars worth of litigation to reach a settlement earlier this year.

The original estimate on the design of the cap was $7 million, which includes $5 million for construction. With it taking another building season, that bill will come in higher. El Dorado County, which was the main defendant in the case because it operated the landfill, must also cover 100 years of operations and maintenance at the site.

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