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HEADLINE: DUMP CLEANUP TO TAKE YEARS BUT IT'S ALREADY A  
SUCCESS

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BODY:

In the annals of toxic waste, a barren 40 stories of trash in southeast Monterey Park ranks as something of a success story.

The defunct Operating Industries Inc. dump, once considered one of the worst toxic hazards in the state and nation, cleaned up its act enough to win favorable comment in a 1988 federal study. These days, some people, with a straight face, even mention the possibility of someday growing plants on the site, sandwiched between Monterey Park and Montebello.

However, the dump's toxic legacy runs deep. And its recovery is many decades away.

Officials of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency now are presenting their latest solution: Top the 190-acre site with an elaborate plastic cover that could cost \$61 million to \$116 million.

Combined with an extensive system to extract and treat potentially harmful gases generated by the landfill, the cover would be designed to minimize malodorous emissions from the 30 million cubic yards of trash.

The idea is part of a proposal that could cost as much as \$300 million and could go on for the next 45 to 60 years, officials said. The EPA's master formula for treating the dump will not even be complete until 1993, said Shelley Sussman, a federal environmental engineer.

"This site won't look . . . pristine," Brian Ullensvang, Sussman's engineer colleague, told an audience of three dozen residents at Schurr High School in Montebello recently.

He turned to face a mural that covered the school cafeteria wall, with a colorful panoply of birds of paradise, jonquils, gladiolus in the foreground and verdant mountains behind. "It won't look like this."

Later Sussman added: "Realistically, it will not be a golf course and it will not be a park. But that does not imply it is not safe to be in the

neighborhood."

Today, six years after closure of the controversial landfill and four years after the site's inclusion on the federal Superfund list, even those who were the most vocal opponents of the dump say the situation has improved and the acrid odors are not as strong.

"Many people are disappointed with the speed of the cleanup. We all would like it to be done yesterday," said Hank Yoshitake, the long-time leader of a Montebello homeowners group as he walked in his driveway a block from the site. "But you walk around here now and you don't smell anything very often."

The dump's toxicity dates from the 1950s, when there was less fear of liquid wastes -- and fewer regulations on dumping them. Oil companies, food companies, aerospace industries and waste haulers disposed of a vast range of toxic liquids, including such potentially cancer-causing substances as vinyl chloride, trichloroethylene, benzene and toluene.

At least 200 million gallons of hazardous waste were dumped by as many as 4,000 companies, federal officials say.

Significant progress has been made on the most obvious problems. And now, when concerned citizens assemble to hear the latest federal briefing, as they did 10 days ago in Montebello, they tend to look back almost nostalgically.

During a break in the meeting at the school, Leland T. Saito recalled that as a boy 25 years ago, he and his buddies would go down into the bottom of the dump, then little more than a deep garbage pit near their homes, and shoot birds with slingshots.

Today, he pointed out, the dump is a substantial hillock, rising 150 to 250 feet above the landscape and appearing as a natural land formation to passers-by on the Pomona Freeway. It is so large now, residents say, that television reception has been fouled because the dump's height blocks signals to the area behind it. Montebello Councilman William Molinari walked up and told the story of a man who lit his fireplace in the early 1980s. The entire hearth, he said, became ringed with a Bunsen burner-like flame because methane gas had apparently filtered underground from the dump and seeped into his house.

Samuel Kiang joined the two men, and described house hunting in Montebello around the same time. He said the stench assaulted his nose when he rolled down his car window. He decided to settle a good distance away in Monterey Park. The men recalled a series of Monterey Park and Montebello City Council meetings that were marked by one angry debate after another during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Despite possible \$1,000-a-day fines and heavy criticism from state health and air quality officials, dump operators in 1981 defied orders to temporarily shut down.

EPA Regional Administrator Daniel McGovern has called it "one of the most complex and contaminated sites in the nation." The site is one of four in Los Angeles County and among 91 in the state on the federal government's list of more than 1,200 Superfund locations. Last year, in a federal court agreement, more than 110 companies agreed to pay \$65 million for the dump's cleanup. The companies included some of the nation's biggest: Chevron, Atlantic Richfield, Exxon USA, McDonnell Douglas, Union Oil, Occidental Petroleum and Times Mirror Co., parent firm of the Los Angeles Times.

Since the agreement, cleanup efforts have intensified and about 60 of the firms formed a company called CURE, Coalition Undertaking Remedial Efforts, to oversee their end of the bargain. As many as 75 people work at the landfill daily. Another 15 to 20 off-site employees, including federal environmental officials in San Francisco, work full time on the cleanup effort.

In an unusual attempt to find other companies that contributed to the contamination, the EPA last year ran newspaper ads headlined "Ever Worked Here?" Listing 51 companies, the ad solicited information from workers and former workers of firms that might have dumped hazardous wastes at the landfill. Under federal law, companies that dump hazardous waste, even if they did so legally, still bear responsibility for helping to remedy problems related to the wastes.

The landfill has even played a role in elections. Gov. George Deukmejian, under attack for generous political contributions from landfill companies, acknowledged in 1986 that the dump's owners, Mike Harabedian, Jack Arakelian and Tim Agajanian had been "friends of mine for a long, long time." But, the governor said, he had never discussed landfill operations with them.

Today, trailers at the dump are the headquarters of cleanup crews composed of consultants, contractors and federal officials. In September, the EPA set up sampling stations at the dump and at locations in the surrounding neighborhood, where air is regularly tested for contaminants. Significant results will not be available until next year

Also in September, workers began to dig 25 wells around the dump's perimeter and in selected sites in the surrounding neighborhood to test for possible ground water contamination.

All the activity does little to reassure Monterey Park resident Phyllis Rabins, however. "I'm frustrated still. Some nights I still wake up, coughing at 2, 3, 4 o'clock in the morning. The methane gas is so strong I have a hard time

breathing. My quarrel has always been that they are not moving fast enough." But Hank Yoshitake said the neighborhoods surrounding the dump are beginning to turn around.

"People are fixing up their homes now. Houses are selling for \$300,000, \$350,000. Kids are playing outdoors again. There are areas where it's still going to smell, particularly when they drill to do tests. But if you're sick and the doctor has to give you a shot, it's going to hurt," he said.

"From the day the dump closed in 1984, we knew it would get better. For a long time this dump had been giving us headaches, figuratively and literally. But that's all over with now, thank God."

#### HISTORY OF THE OII DUMP

Pre-1948: Sand and gravel mined from site.

1948: Landfill opened by city of Monterey Park and private firm for garbage disposal.

1952: Taken over by Operating Industries Inc.

1954: Regional water board allows dumping of hazardous liquid wastes.

1974: Pomona Freeway splits 190-acre landfill.

1975: Montebello subdivision tract built next to dump.

1978: Enforcement agencies note intense odor problems.

1979: Getty Synthetic Fuels begins extracting gas and selling it to Southern California Gas Co.

1981: County health officials cite dump for lacking plan to control potentially hazardous gases.

1982: Liquids leak into Montebello neighborhood.

1983: Heavy rains bring mudslides; state health officials begin study of nearby residents; air quality officials record high levels of vinyl chloride in Montebello; more liquids found leaking into Montebello.

1984: Underground fire; dump closes after state announces OII is the 16th worst hazardous site among 97 in state.

1986: Getty ceases gas processing; OII selected as federal Superfund site.

1989: More than 110 companies agree to pay \$65 million in cleanup costs.

GRAPHIC: Photo, Drilling rig searches for contaminants in neighborhood near Ashiya Avenue and Villa Street in Montebello. Landfill mountain is in background. ; Photo, Hank Yoshitake, leader of Montebello homeowners group and neighbor of dump, at drilling site used to test ground water contamination.

LOU MACK / Los Angeles Times; Map, Operating Industries Landfill