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Army Corps starts drilling test wells at Cambria beach

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Four years after the Cambria Community Services District sought to drill exploratory test wells two miles north, contractors hired by the Army Corps of Engineers finally drilled two holes in a Cambria beach.

They're taking samples of water, soil and sand, and leaving the exploratory holes buried to be expanded later into two test wells.

The work Wednesday and Thursday was near county-owned Shamel Park.

State Parks has not yet given permission to work on its land just to north, at the mouth of Santa Rosa Creek and the south end of Moonstone Beach, pending further environmental review.

The work was the first in a series of tasks that must be completed by Oct. 31 to comply with restrictions set down by the California Coastal Commission to avoid damaging habitat for several endangered species, including steelhead trout.

Initial steps involve testing any contaminants in the water and soil, some of which could be game-changers for the Cambria Community Services District's plan to extract water from under the sandy shoreline to supply a desalination facility it plans to use as a supplemental water source.

The district's moratorium on new water hookups begun in 2001 won't be removed until such a source is online.

For two days last week, an SUV-sized drilling rig lumbered along the park fence line to a ramp by its playground, then maneuvered down a concrete ramp and onto the beach.

It will take about two weeks to get contaminant test results, according to Kathleen Anderson, the Corps' project manager.

If results are negative for any contaminants, Anderson expects drilling equipment to return the first week of October.

The two test wells would be left in place, buried under several feet of sand, so more water can be drawn out for subsequent tests.

The original geotech project was to include a third well on an adjacent State Park beach, but Nick Franco, superintendent of the San Luis Obispo Coast District of State Parks, said he won't issue a "right of entry" permit without a study that meets requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act. Franco said in an Aug. 31 e-mail to the Corps, "We believe that the (services district) is the proper lead agency for the project and the Army Corps is a contractor to the (district)."

The Corps, a federal agency, has taken the lead-agency status on the geo-tech project, a move critics say was designed to circumvent state environmental requirements by using the Corps ability to obtain a federal "categorical exemption" from state environmental reviews.

Franco added, "I think (the Corps) actually can drill there, and I think I will allow them to drill there, but only after I can see in full disclosure, and disclosure to the public, what they're planning to do, what the potential environmental impacts of that work are and how they're planning on making those impacts as low as possible, (which means) at an acceptable level."