

August 25, 2009 -- SF Waste to Nevada: What it Might Look Like (KOLO TV Reno)

Standing in Jungo Flat, a high desert plateau, 28 miles west of Winnemucca, it's hard to picture a mountain of waste rising, but that's the proposal.

Four-thousand tons of waste arriving five days a week, shipped by rail hundreds of miles from the Bay Area, over several decades rising more than 200 feet. The size of the project and what it might contain is a major factor in the growing opposition.

"Air quality issues. You'll have water quality issues, antiquity issues, cultural issues relative to Native Americans," says Winnemucca resident Jim French. "There's a lot of things that haven't been looked at."

Annie Drake worries the landfill won't be like the local dump. Any recyclables will be separated out long before it gets to Nevada leaving the worst of the worst. "It's the bottom of the goo pile," she says.

A couple of hundred miles away on the other side of the Sierra, there's another rural community that's been living with a Recology landfill for 14 years.

Wheatland, California is a quiet agricultural town sitting in the Central Valley north of Sacramento.

Several miles outside of town is Recology's Ostrom Road facility. If a visitor comes expecting the usual city dump and all that implies, they're in for some surprises.

Seen from a half mile away, it's hard to distinguish a certain hillside from others nearby which have been part of the landscape for millennium, but it's a landfill--a small mountain of waste rising from what was level ground.

It's only on the other side, the working face, where that process is in view. Trucks bearing waste from Yuba, Sutter and other foothill counties arrive here regularly to unload. Somewhere between 800 to a thousand tons a day are spread, compacted and covered. Current permits would allow triple that amount, three quarters of what is proposed for Jungo Flat.

Even up close the hillside looks almost natural. Native grasses cover it, though you'll also see piping for runoff and methane gas retrieval. And here you can smell the gas, though a short distance away we couldn't.

The methane, by the way, ends up being used for power generation. We're told the ground water is protected by layers of lining and is monitored.

The wind was not blowing the day we were there, but portable fences were in place to catch it. We're told when debris makes it off site, it's retrieved. We didn't see any in the surrounding landscape.

Neither did we see the expected flock of seagulls. Birds are a special concern here as Beale Air Force Base is a short distance away. The issue turns up in inspection reports we've read. Apparently bird bombs are often used to keep them away. This, company officials say is what a modern landfill should be.

"Since we've been in operation since 1995 we think we've been a good neighbor," says Paul Yamamoto, a Recology Vice President and General Manager of its landfill division. "We've managed all the issues typically associated with a landfill."

That's not to say there haven't been issues. The most recent violations noted by California officials date back to May of 2008 and included uncovered waste, improper cover material and elevated levels of methane gas.

Yamamoto says any inspectors' concerns are dealt with immediately and there's been little complaint from neighbors.

"Most people don't realize that we're here and that's the kind of operation we want to run."

And we found that to be true. Fifteen years ago there was opposition to the landfill's construction. Today there seems to be little concern about its present operation, but there is worry and its something some Wheatland residents share with their counterparts in Winnemucca.

The Yuba County landfill could see Bay Area waste long before Jungo is even built.

More on that and where all of this may be headed, plus a surprise about the issue of interstate disposal in tomorrow's report.

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