



the Country Almanac

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Oil . . .

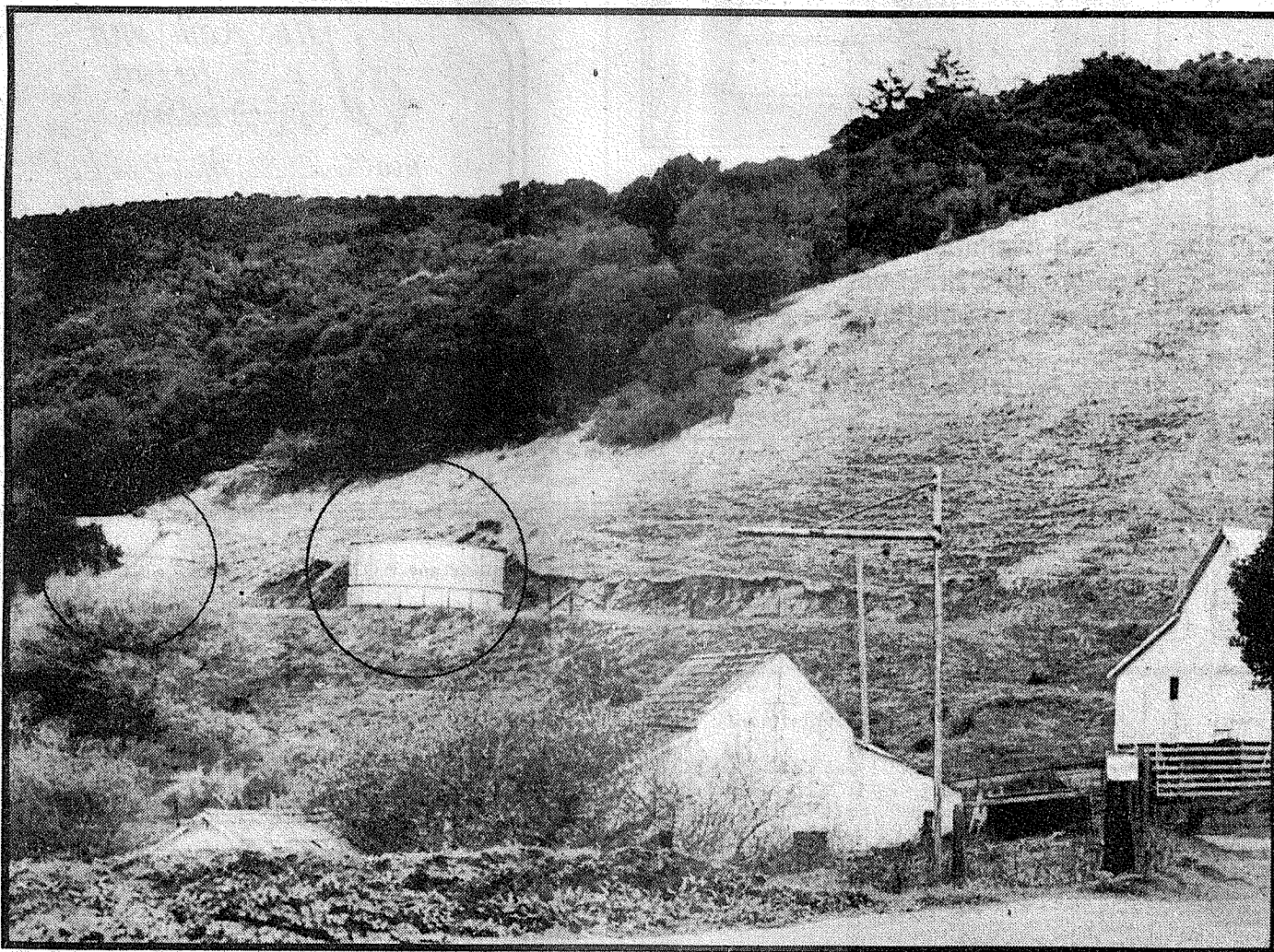
How will it affect the San Mateo Coastside?

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A wave rolls in at Montara Beach. The possibility of oil wells along the horizon raises many questions. Can spills and pollution be prevented? How will the oil get to its destination? What

will be its destination? Who will build and man the platforms? Where will workers live? Will there be tank farms, pipes, or other facilities on shore?



Two tanks beside San Gregorio Rd. collect oil by pipe from a number of producing wells on either side of the highway. How many more will be needed if new test wells are successful? Photos by Marion Softky.

The national lust for oil is adding a whole new dimension to the problems of planning the future of the San Mateo County coast. If proposed explorations for oil, both on and off the county shoreline are successful, there is widespread fear that the impacts of oil production could have disastrous effects on the rugged and beautiful Coastside, and on the public efforts to preserve it.

The Coastside—340 square miles of rocks and beaches, farms and pastures, canyons and forests—is already under unrelenting pressure for development and recreation from the urban populations to the north and east. The Local Coastal Program, a major planning effort to achieve the goals of the Coastal Act, is nearing completion and will be ready for public hearings late this spring.

Issues in the Local Coastal Program are familiar: preservation of agricultural land versus the right to sell and develop; the demand for coastal recreation and its impacts; and, always, the overriding shortage of water. But the impacts of oil production could be new and large. Many people conjure up nightmares of giant pipes and tank farms, new demands for housing and roads, and the threat of spills off shore and polluted water on shore.

Some of these fears may be exaggerated, others not. A lot is being done in the county to find out what the impacts are and what can be done about them. Following are outlines of local view of the problems on both on and off shore oil drilling.

See pages 2 and 3

On-shore oil—it's not new

When oil was first discovered in San Mateo County, legend has it that loggers used to light their lamps with it. Later, at least one enterprising businessman is reputed to have sold it straight from the well to passing motorists.

Since the last century, oil production has proceeded sporadically in basins south of Half Moon Bay and west of La Honda. Production was low and slow, and the price of oil did not encourage intensive development of the field. According to Debbie Nelson of the county Planning Department, total production in 1977 was 31,000 barrels, or less than 100 barrels per day. There are presently 15 wells operating in San Mateo County.

With the price of oil soaring, the county's resource is looking much more interesting. If the 21 new exploratory oil well permits approved March 2 by the county's Zoning Hearing Officer Ben McCavitt all strike oil, production could climb sharply to 2,000 barrels a day or more. If all the new wells come in, William Weaver, president of the ZIA Corporation which obtained all but one of the permits, gave his most optimistic projection as 3,000 to 4,000 barrels per day in three or four production areas.

The potentially sharp increase in oil production has many local residents and conservationists worried. They fear that producing 20 or more times as much oil may create major new impacts on the fragile Coastside. For example, will water needed for drilling deplete scarce water supplies? Is there any danger of polluting creeks or water supplies? Will grading for roads and pads at both exploratory drilling sites and production sites create unsightly scars? Will operations and storage tanks be visible from scenic roads? Will traffic be increased?

The county staff concluded the impacts would be negligible and did not require an environmental impact report. With respect to water, it noted that county ordinances and state regulations protect water supplies. Ground disturbed during drilling must be revegetated and returned to a natural state, under the conditions of the permit.

For example, in the staff report on the application for seven exploratory oil wells on agricultural lands belonging to Peter Folger of Woodside, the staff report noted the wells would be located on the central portion of the property not visible from San

Gregorio Road. There are six other wells operating on the property and well maintained, it said. The drilling would take place on level sites not requiring significant grading, an existing farm road would be used.

The 22 oil permits shared the hearing March 2 with an assortment of other zoning matters—remodelling, auto wrecking, a kennel permit, a rest home and a house moving. After some protests by Coastside residents, Mr. McCavitt approved the permits. He noted that if oil is found, there will be a further hearing before him to review conditions of operation. The applicants also need a permit from the Coastal Commission.

The Committee for Green Foothills submitted a letter requesting that an environmental impact report be prepared to deal with the cumulative impacts of present and proposed oil drilling. It also claimed the conditions dealing with grading, rehabilitation of the site, visual impacts, and adequate protection of the creeks were inadequate. It is expected that a group of coastside residents and environmentalists will appeal the decision.

Mr. Weaver felt the fears were un-

warranted. "You'll hardly see it from a public road," he said.

Local wells do not produce a lot of oil, but they will produce a long time, Mr. Weaver explained. For example, he said one of the largest local wells may produce 50 to 300 barrels per day, by contrast really big wells such as the ones in Texas or Arabia might produce 7000 to 12,000 barrels a day. The local wells also have a long lifetime and will produce over a period of 25 to 30 years, he said. Mr. Weaver estimated the local reserves at 150 to 250 million barrels.

The actual drilling of the exploratory well is rather rapid. Harry Harper of the Carlsburg Petroleum Company, which also received a permit, noted that these are relatively shallow wells and do not take a long time to drill. "We can be out in five to six days," he commented. He also claimed that the air pollution from a producing well is no more than that from a gas stove or a car.

Asked what the San Mateo County oil was like, Mr. Weaver replied with enthusiasm, "Beautiful—high quality; high gravity, low sulfur."

by Marion Softky

Off-shore oil drilling — Fear of the unknown

Its official name is OCS Lease Sale No. 53.

It is the proposed federal sale of leases for oil drilling off the California coast from approximately Monterey north to Mendocino County. Sixty of the 243 tracts are off the shore of San Mateo County beyond the three mile limit (which is under state

jurisdiction). Announced last summer over the objections of both San Mateo County and the state, the lease sale is already well into the environmental review process. The timetable published by the federal Bureau of Land Management calls for a draft Environmental Impact Statement in May 1980, the final statement in September 1980,

and the sale of leases in Feb. 1981.

Even after 1981, it will be a "six year minimum before we could deliver a drop of oil on the Coastside," R. C. Erickson of the Chevron Oil Company stated at a recent workshop on off-shore oil drilling sponsored by the Sierra Club, the Committee for Green Foothills and the Northern

California Coastal Trust. He explained that six years is needed to clear the permit, conduct studies of the sites, drill exploration wells and then—if oil is discovered—install production wells. And there is always the possibility the wells will come up dry.

Fred Lyon, chairman of the county

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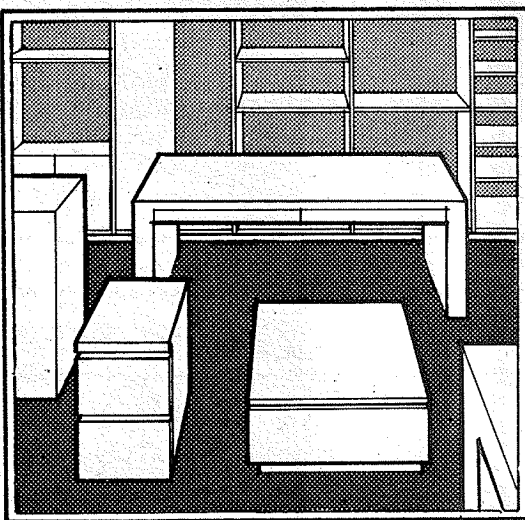


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Features:

- 1 Oil...
How will it affect the San Mateo Coastside?
- 2 Off-shore oil drilling—
Fear of the unknown
On-shore oil—it's not new

Towns:

- 7 Public hearings before staff reassignments
- 8 Woodside does it too! five teachers cut
- 14 Portola Valley Ranch back before council
- 17 Sequoia cuts two administrative positions

Departments:

- 4/5 For the record
- 9 Love of the grape
- 12 Dooryard gardens
- 16 Plants of the wild
- 22/24 Calendar
- 26/32 Classified
- 33/35 Real estate

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