

Efforts underway to scrub spilled oil from California coast (Update)

May 20 2015, by Christopher Weber



This photo provided by the Santa Barbara County Fire Department shows an oil slick from a broken pipeline off the central California coast near Santa Barbara on Tuesday, May 19, 2015. Capt. Dave Zaniboni of the Santa Barbara County Fire Department says the pipeline on the land near Refugio State Beach broke Tuesday and spilled oil into a culvert that ran under the U.S. 101 freeway and into the ocean. (Mike Eliason/Santa Barbara County Fire Department via AP)

Cleanup crews fanned out Wednesday along a stretch of scenic

California coastline stained by thousands of gallons of crude oil that spilled from broken pipe and flowed into the Pacific Ocean.

Workers from an environmental cleanup company strapped on boots and gloves and picked up shovels and rakes to tackle the gobs of goo stuck to sand and rocks along Refugio State Beach on the southern Santa Barbara County coast.

The accident happened on the same stretch of coastline as a 1969 spill, which was the largest ever in U.S. waters at the time and is credited with giving rise to the American environmental movement.

Members of the International Bird Rescue organization were also on hand Wednesday to clean any birds that become covered with oil, though none were immediately spotted in the calm seas that produced only small waves.

The broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off, creating a slick some 4 miles long about 20 miles west of Santa Barbara.

Initial estimates put the spill at about 21,000 gallons, but that figure would likely change after a Wednesday morning flyover gave a better sense of the scope, U.S. Coast Guard spokeswoman Jennifer Williams said.



An oil slick washes up on the shore Tuesday, May 19, 2015, near Goleta, Calif. Capt. Dave Zaniboni of the Santa Barbara County Fire Department says the pipeline on the land near Refugio State Beach broke Tuesday and spilled oil into a culvert that ran under the U.S. 101. (Kenneth Song/The News-Press via AP)

Authorities responding to reports of a foul smell near Refugio State Beach around noon found a half-mile slick in the ocean, county fire Capt. Dave Zaniboni said. They traced the oil to the pipeline that spilled into a culvert running under a highway and into a storm drain that empties into the ocean.

The 24-inch pipeline was shut off about three hours later. It's owned by Plains All American Pipeline, which said it stopped the flow of oil and blocked the culvert.

"Plains deeply regrets this release has occurred and is making every effort to limit its environmental impact," the company said in a statement.

After the spill, boats from the nonprofit collective Clean Seas helped with cleanup but were having trouble because much of the oil was close to the shore, Williams said. About 850 gallons of oil have been recovered from the water, she said.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife has closed fishing and shellfish harvesting for a mile east and west of the beach.

The area is home to offshore oil rigs, and small amounts of tar from natural seepage regularly show up on beaches. In 1969, several hundred thousand gallons spilled from a blowout on an oil platform and thousands of seabirds and many marine mammals were killed.



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The oil industry brings risks, said Bob Deans, spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"Santa Barbara learned that lesson over 40 years ago when offshore drilling led to disaster," he said in a statement.

The Santa Barbara-based Environmental Defense Center said having it occur in "a sensitive and treasured environment is devastating to watch."

The group expressed special concern for the many whale species that migrate through the area.



In this photo provided by the Santa Barbara County Fire Department people walk on a beach with an oil slick from a broken pipeline off the central California coast near Santa Barbara on Tuesday, May 19, 2015. Capt. Dave Zaniboni of the Santa Barbara County Fire Department says the pipeline on the land near Refugio State Beach broke Tuesday and spilled oil into a culvert that ran under the U.S. 101 freeway and into the ocean. (Mike Eliason/Santa Barbara County Fire Department via AP)

"Oil spills are part of the ugly cost of fossil fuel development, made even worse by aging domestic infrastructure," said Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director for the Center for Biological Diversity.

It was unclear how long the cleanup would take and whether Refugio beach and other areas would be reopened in time for Memorial Day weekend.



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