

Thousands of gallons of oil sopped up from California coast

May 21 2015, by Christopher Weber And Brian Melley



Rocks are covered with oil on the beach at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 6,000 gallons of oil had been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast in a cleanup effort that is now going 24 hours a day, officials said, but that's just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

More than 7,700 gallons of oil has been raked, skimmed and vacuumed

from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast, just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline, officials said.

Up to 105,000 gallons may have leaked from the ruptured pipeline Tuesday, and up to 21,000 gallons reached the sea just north of Santa Barbara, according to estimates. The [environmental impact](#) still is being assessed, but so far there is no evidence of widespread harm to birds and sea life.

The early toll on wildlife included two oil-covered pelicans, officials said. Biologists counted dead fish and crustaceans along sandy beaches and rocky shores.

The spill occurred along a long, rustic coast that forms the northern boundary of the Santa Barbara Channel, home to a rich array of [sea life](#). Whales, dolphins, sea lions, seals, sea otters and birds such as pelicans live along the channel between the mainland and the Channel Islands, five of which are a national park surrounded by waters declared a national marine sanctuary.

Workers in protective suits have shoveled black sludge off beaches, and boats towed booms into place to corral two oil slicks. The cleanup effort continued through the night and additional crew members and boats came out early Thursday, U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Jonathan McCormick said.

They could get help from expected light winds and calm seas, said Dr. Sean Anderson, an environmental scientist at California State University, Channel Islands.

"When the water's choppy, the response gets complicated. But since the water's nice and flat, the oil sticks together and it's easier to spot and

easier to pick up," he said.

Regulators and workers with Plains All American Pipeline LP, which runs the pipeline, aim to begin excavating the pipe Thursday to get their first look at the breach.

The company's chief executive visited the spill site Wednesday and apologized.



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"We deeply, deeply regret that this incident has occurred at all," Chairman and CEO Greg L. Armstrong said at a news conference. "We apologize for the damage that it's done to the wildlife and to the environment."

Crude was flowing through the pipe at 54,600 gallons an hour during the leak, the company said. Company officials didn't say how long it leaked before it was discovered and shut down or discuss how fast the oil escaped.

Federal regulators from the Department of Transportation, which oversees [oil pipeline](#) safety, investigated the leak's cause, the pipe's condition and the potential violations.

The 24-inch pipe built in 1991 had no previous problems and was thoroughly inspected in 2012, according to the company. The pipe underwent similar tests about two weeks ago, though the results had not been analyzed yet.

The Los Angeles Times reported that the company accumulated 175 safety and maintenance infractions since 2006, according to federal records. The infractions involved pump failure, equipment malfunction, pipeline corrosion and operator error. The newspaper said a Plains Pipeline spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment about its regulatory record.

There was no estimate on the cost of the cleanup or how long it might take.

A combination of soiled beaches and the pungent stench of petroleum led officials to close popular campgrounds Refugio State Beach and El Capitan State Beach over the Memorial Day weekend.

Still, tourists pulled off the Pacific Coast Highway to eye the disaster from overlooking bluffs.



Oil spill clean-up crew members gather for a morning briefing at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Thursday, May 21, 2015. More than 6,000 gallons of oil had been raked, skimmed and vacuumed from a spill that stretched across 9 miles of California coast in a cleanup effort that is now going 24 hours a day, officials said, but that's just a fraction of the sticky, stinking goo that escaped from a broken pipeline. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

"It smells like what they use to pave the roads," said Fan Yang, of Indianapolis, who was hoping to find cleaner beaches in Santa Barbara, about 20 miles away. "I'm sad for the birds—if they lose their habitat."

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife closed fishing and shellfish harvesting for a mile east and west of Refugio beach and deployed

booms to protect the nesting and foraging habitat of the snowy plover and the least tern, both endangered shore birds.

Gov. Jerry Brown on Wednesday night declared a state of emergency, a move that frees up additional state funding to help with the cleanup.

The coastline was the scene of a much larger spill in 1969—the largest in U.S. waters at the time—that is credited with giving rise to the American environmental movement.



Crews from Patriot Environmental Services collect oil-covered seaweed and sand from the shoreline at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A 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. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)

Environmental groups used the spill as a new opportunity to take a shot at fossil fuels and remind people of the area's notoriety with oil spills.

"Big Oil comes with big risks—from drilling to delivery," 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."

Large offshore rigs still dot the horizon off the coast, pumping crude to shore and small amounts of tar from natural seepage regularly show up on beaches.



A pelican covered in oil sits on a beach about a mile west of Refugio State Beach, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (Kenneth Song/The News-Press via AP) MANDATORY CREDIT; SANTA MARIA TIMES OUT



A helicopter coordinates ships below pulling booms to collect oil from a spill near Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)



Mike Harris, of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, prepares to rescue a pelican covered in oil on the beach about a mile west of Refugio State Beach, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (Kenneth Song/The News-Press via AP) MANDATORY CREDIT; SANTA MARIA TIMES OUT



Volunteers fill buckets with oil near Refugio State Beach after an oil spill north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)



This photo shows whales along the surface near a sheen of oil north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)



John Ziegler, of Pismo Beach, Calif, part of a group of citizen volunteers, hauls buckets of collected oil up from the beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)



Clean-up workers monitor the source of an oil pipeline break near Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)



Clean up workers place shovels of oil-laden sand in bags while a larger group of workers begin clean up operations at Refugio State Beach, site of an oil spill, north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A 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. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)



Clean up crews remove oil-laden sand on the beach at Refugio State Beach, site of an oil spill, north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A 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. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)



The source of an oil pipeline break, top, is seen above Highway 101, where oil traveled through a culvert under the freeway and to the ocean, near Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)



Clean-up crews work at the site of an oil spill at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif., Wednesday, May 20, 2015. A broken onshore pipeline spewed oil down a storm drain and into the ocean for several hours Tuesday before it was shut off. (AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)

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