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Natural Oil Seeps in Southern California

Crude oil and natural gas naturally enter the ocean at areas known as "seeps." The offshore seeps along the Southern California coast are particularly visible, abundant, and well-studied.

- Offshore seeps in Southern California add about 5 million gallons of oil to the ocean annually, with wide year-to-year variation (National Academy of Sciences, 2003).
- Though from a natural source, oil from seeps shows similar appearance, behavior, and effects as oil released during drilling and other human activities.
- Oil from seeps affects fish, birds, and wildlife; can impair surface waters and shorelines; and can impact recreational activities.

What are seeps?

Seeps are areas where oil and natural gas naturally leak out of the ground through fractures and sediments, in the same way freshwater springs bring water to the surface.

How common are they in California?

The waters off Southern California host hundreds of known, naturally occurring oil and gas seeps, with more documented on land. Although their rate of release may vary over time, their locations are consistent and predictable. Slicks from many larger seeps are visible by satellite, and some are persistent enough to be features on navigation charts.



Icons show natural oil seeps near Santa Barbara, California (NOAA/Google)

How much do seeps leak?

Natural seeps in Southern California contribute about 5 million gallons of oil to the ocean annually, with wide year to year variation (NAS 2003). However, in the Coal Oil Point area alone, seep estimates range from 4,200 to 25,000 gallons of oil per day, or 1.5 to 9 million gallons annually (Leifer et al. 2005).