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Single Manhattan tarball matched to Refugio oil spill source: Investigation continues

The Department of Fish and Wildlife's Office of Spill Prevention and Response (CDFW-OSPR) received a report of a tar-like substance on Manhattan Beach, Los Angeles County, on May 27, 2015. OSPR staff responded and confirmed the existence of tarballs on the beach. Low levels of tarballs are typically present on Southern California beaches from natural sources, most commonly from offshore seepage from fissures in the seabed; however, the significant increase in the numbers of tarballs observed on the beach triggered a dedicated incident response with the activation of a Unified Command and establishment of a command post at Manhattan Beach. The response was led by the United States Coast Guard and the CDFW-OSPR. The nearby Chevron facility activated its response plan as a precaution. The Unified Command initiated cleanup of the tarballs and all of the beaches were cleaned to what were estimated to be background levels of naturally present tarballs.

As part of standard procedure OSPR staff took samples of the tarballs for chemical analyses by its Petroleum Chemistry Laboratory in Rancho Cordova, CA. These samples were run through a series of tests to determine the source of the excess numbers of tarballs. Again, as part of standard protocol, the analytical data were compared with samples of known natural seeps and other potential sources of oil in the area. Given the timing of the Santa Barbara pipeline rupture, a Manhattan Beach tarball sample was also compared to a source sample taken from the Refugio Incident oil spill. OSPR's analysis focused upon similarities in key components in the oil sample and considered those predictable chemical changes the tarball would likely experience due to environmental weathering.

After an exhaustive analysis by the chemists at OSPR's Petroleum Chemistry Laboratory, including independent peer review and corroboration of the methods used and interpretation of results, OSPR determined that the Manhattan tarball sample matched the source sample taken from the Refugio Incident oil spill. Further, the OSPR lab determined that the sample did not match local natural seep oil or oil from vessels in the vicinity around the time of the tarball event.

Although the test results of this tarball sample matched the Refugio Incident oil spill, the source of all tarballs on Manhattan Beach cannot be determined based on one sample. Tar balls from natural seeps will continue to wash ashore and OSPR will continue to collect samples for analysis as part of the on-going investigation. CDFW-OSPR will also continue its established practice of responding to reports of concentrations of tarballs to determine the

source, natural or otherwise and, if necessary, oversee a cleanup of petroleum from illegal spills.

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