



The Resources Agency ♦ Department of Fish and Game
Office of Spill Prevention and Response
OSPR News Release



Media Contact — Dana Michaels, OSPR Information Officer: 916-327-9948

November 17, 2004

State investigates oiled seabirds on central coast

The State Department of Fish and Game's pollution division, the Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR), is investigating wildlife injuries at Seacliff State Beach in Aptos. Since September 11, 2004, State Park Rangers and others have found 19 oiled cormorants and one common murre washed ashore near the pier. To date, only two of the 20 cormorants have survived and been returned to the wild.

These birds have been heavily coated with a dark, viscous oil. No spill has been reported in the area, and searches for a slick have been fruitless. A few tarballs have been collected from the beach, and samples of the tarballs and oily feathers have been sent to OSPR's Petroleum Chemistry Laboratory in Rancho Cordova. Initial analysis suggests that this may be a weathered intermediate fuel oil or "bunker" fuel used in large ships.

Local residents may see OSPR wardens, scientists and oil spill prevention specialists working in the Aptos area to locate the source of the oil, including underwater inspection of the *SS Palo Alto*.

"Since the birds were all found near the cement ship, and the oil didn't appear weathered – even over a month's time – we're focusing on sunken vessels in the area as a possible source," said Fish and Game Warden John Sutton, the State incident commander.

The *SS Palo Alto*, constructed for use in World War I, was towed to Seacliff Beach in 1930. It was intentionally grounded, the lower decks flooded, and the upper decks turned into an amusement center. Two years later, the owners went out of business and the ship was stripped and abandoned.

OSPR regularly updates the U.S. Coast Guard on the investigation's status. State Parks personnel are monitoring Seacliff State Beach, and California's Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN) has been activated. The oiled birds were taken to the OWCN's San Francisco Bay Oiled Wildlife Care and Education Center in Cordelia.

"If people see oiled or injured wildlife in the area, they should notify State Parks employees, and not touch the animal," Sutton said. "Animals in distress are even more dangerous than when they're feeling fine."

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DFG-OSPR Website: www.dfg.ca.gov/ospr