



# *Unified Command News Release*

## SAN MATEO MYSTERY OIL SPILL

DATE: February 8, 2002      TIME: 11:30 A.M.

### **Oily seabirds mystery solved**

The U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Office - San Francisco and California Department of Fish and Game Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) have identified the source of oil that has incapacitated or killed over 1,541 seabirds off the northern California coast since November 24. It is the SS *Jacob Luckenbach*, a 468-foot freight ship that sank approximately 17 miles Southwest of the Golden Gate Bridge, on July 14, 1953 as the result of a collision.

In a statement released today, Governor Gray Davis said, " I would like to thank the Department of Fish and Game's Office of Spill Prevention and Response and the U.S. Coast Guard for their tireless efforts in spearheading the search for the source of the oil spill that has depleted California's offshore bird populations over the last ten years. The comprehensive, team approach with the State Lands Commission, the National Atmospheric and Oceanographic Administration, U.S. Navy Salvage personnel, and the National Marine Sanctuaries, along with the response industry, brought together experts in oiled wildlife treatment and rehabilitation, satellite imagery, vessel operations, ocean currents, resource economics, wildlife behavior, and oil fingerprint analysis."

On Tuesday, a submersible remotely operated vehicle (ROV), owned by Vortex Diving Co. of Alameda, was lowered to the *Luckenbach*. The ROV's video camera did not show any direct evidence of oil coming from the ship, but the ORV did observe minor amounts of oil moving about in one of the vessel's cargo holds, and USCG and OSPR personnel in surface vessels observed small amounts of oil on the surface above it. In addition, the ROV support vessel *Eaglet* observed oil stains on its anchor chain when the anchor was pulled up. The ROV collected oil samples from the surface above the wreck and from the support vessel's anchor chain. Coast guard personnel were also able to obtain samples of the surfaced oil.

Those oil samples were immediately sent to both OSPR's Petroleum Chemistry Laboratory near Sacramento and the Coast Guard's Marine Safety Laboratory in Groton, Connecticut. Both labs independently analyzed the oil's chemical make-up, then compared the resulting "fingerprint" with those taken from oiled birds' feathers, tar balls, and oil sheen observed and sampled on December 8, 2001. They matched.

"This is very exciting. We've been trying to find the sources of mystery spills for years, so this discovery is truly gratifying." said Bill Castle, Supervising Chemist at the State lab. "There's a real sense of relief, because these spills create a big problem for us and for our wildlife."

The Unified Command (USCG and OSPR) now has the significant challenge of identifying the best way to remove the threat of further discharges from the oil source into the environment. The U.S. Navy Supervisor of Salvage (SupSalv) has been called in to provide technical expertise to the unified command in developing plans for any salvage efforts.

The *Jacob Luckenbach* is one of several sunken vessels in Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary that was being investigated as a possible source of numerous "mystery" oil spills. Details on the vessels and collision are on the Internet, at <http://www.cinms.nos.noaa.gov/bridge/dbase/gfmns/jacobluckenbach.html>.

"The investigation to identify the source of the mystery spill has been a scientific process of elimination," said Scott Schaefer, OSPR Deputy Administrator. Shortly after the oiled birds were discovered, both OSPR's and the Coast Guard's labs were able to determine that the samples were from the same source and that the source was not consistent with natural oil seeps from the Monterey Formation or with Alaskan North Slope crude oil. Both labs identified the oil as either a heavy fuel oil or an unidentified crude oil.

In early January, six weeks into the current incident, birds coated with fresh oil were still being recovered along a 220-mile stretch of California's coast. This led investigators to suspect either multiple releases from the same vessel or from a submerged vessel. According to OSPR Administrator Harlan Henderson, "A diverse group of experts was assembled from federal, state and local agencies, as well as representatives of the maritime industry. We operated under a Unified Command - consistent with the State Oil Spill Contingency Plan - which brought all

the key players together as a team and allowed us to openly share all information. This validates the old saying that 'none of us are as smart as all of us.' We used all available technologies, including satellites, trajectory modeling, seismic data, and petroleum fingerprinting."

Investigators from the Coast Guard, OSPR, and the State Lands Commission searched vessel traffic records and identified several oil tankers as potential spill suspects because of their routes and cargo. Law enforcement personnel obtained oil samples taken from these vessels by commercial laboratories. OSPR's Petroleum Chemistry Lab discovered that the samples from these oil tankers were not consistent with the oil from the feathers on the oiled birds.

As the investigation proceeded, the theory that a sunken vessel off shore was the source became more credible. 23 samples of oiled bird feathers and three samples of tarballs collected from November 25, 2001 through January 4, 2002 matched a slick sampled on December 8, 2001, which matched samples taken from tarballs and birds' feathers. In addition, the December 8 slick matched historical samples taken from similar mystery incidents in 1992-93, 1997-98, 1999, and February 2001.

Since November 24, 2001, the date of the initial report of sea birds being impacted by oil, the U.S. Coast Guard and OSPR have been working together in a unified effort to locate the source of the oil. In addition, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and California State Lands Commission joined the investigative team to solve the mystery.

The multi-agency investigative team utilized numerous methods and technologies to assist them in their search. Sightings from Coast Guard aircraft and patrol boats, Department of Fish and Game wildlife observation aircraft, and commercial contract helicopters identified oil sheens and some tarballs southeast of the Farallon Islands. Commercial satellite photos also indicated the presence of oil sheens in the area. Even a seismic study was employed. Local outreach that targeted commercial and fishing vessels that operate in the area was used. A marine radio broadcast was transmitted that asked these operators to keep an eye out for oil and to immediately contact the Coast Guard if any was observed.

Investigators searched available databases and identified several sunken vessels in the vicinity of the Farallon Islands. These included the Chemical Tanker *Puerto Rican*, which exploded and sank in 1984, the aircraft carrier USS *Independence*, which was intentionally sunk in the 1950's, two Navy oilers that sank in heavy seas in 1945, and a couple of other

vessels, including the *Jacob Luckenbach*.

"Now that the source of the oil has been identified and the team prepares for the oil recovery operation," Governor Davis said, "I reaffirm my continuing support, and look forward to the day when this threat is finally eliminated."

As of February 7, 2002, 1,541 oiled birds have been brought to the Wildlife Care Center in Cordelia. Six-hundred and twenty-seven were captured alive, and 914 were dead on arrival. Of the 627 live birds, 206 have been cleaned, rehabilitated and released; 8 are still receiving care, and 413 have died in captivity.

The Wildlife Care Center no longer needs new volunteers, at this time. However, people interested in volunteering too help in future oil spill incidents may register on the OSPR web-site - <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/Ospr/volunteer/volunteer.html>, or visit the IBRRC website, <http://www.ibrrc.org>.

"Thanks to all the volunteers who worked on this incident," said Oiled Wildlife Care Network Veterinarian Scott Newman. "Only with the help of the volunteers were we able to get through this. We appreciate the time and energy they've given."

Photos, past news releases, and background information are available at the Internet web sites listed below.

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#### WEBSITES:

Dept. of Fish & Game - OSPR - <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/Ospr/index.html> U.S. Coast Guard-  
<http://www.uscg.mil/DI/index.htm>  
Oiled Wildlife Care Network - <http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/owcn/default.asp> International Bird Rescue  
Research Center - <http://www.ibrrc.org>

