

VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE — In an abandoned fire station, not far from a beach impacted by the September 28 Point Pedernales oil spill, the Department of Fish and Game's Office of Oil Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) veterinarians and staff are very busy. When notified of the spill, OSPR activated its Oiled Wildlife Care Network, and sent its Veterinary Operations staff to the spill site, to rescue as much wildlife oiled by the spill as possible.

By Thursday afternoon, 86 birds had been brought to OSPR's mobile veterinary van for treatment. Of those, 45 oiled birds died. Twenty-four birds stable enough to make the trip were flown to the International Bird Rescue Research Center (IBRRC) in Berkeley, for more intensive treatment and rehabilitation.

The number of birds rescued — or retrieved, dead — changes hourly, as about twenty people search the beaches and return to the Vandenberg site. On Thursday, approximately 100 oiled birds were observed from a distance, but had yet to be captured.

OSPR has characterized this relatively uninhabited section of California's coast as "extremely sensitive," due to the presence of diverse fish and wildlife species. The OSPR — a division of the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) — will ultimately be responsible for evaluating the environmental impact of this oil spill.

The protection and rescue of wildlife on such a scale, and under such trying conditions as these, couldn't be accomplished without the cooperation of others. Wildlife Branch Director Paul Kelly credits outstanding interagency cooperation from a large group, including Vandenberg AFB, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Coast Guard, Clean Seas, and Torch Operating Company. The trained volunteers in numerous animal welfare organizations, such as Pacific Wildlife Care (of San Luis Obispo), the Santa Barbara Wildlife Care Network, and IBRRC are indispensable at times like this.

"We wouldn't be here and be as effective if it weren't for the great cooperation we've received," Kelly said. "It's helped us do our job much better."

"This has been our best operation yet, for OSPR, despite not having a permanent facility in this area. And the reason is the excellent cooperation we've received from everyone; from all the agencies involved, to the trained volunteers we've utilized," said Jonna Mazet, D.V.M., Program Director of OSPR's statewide Oiled Wildlife Care Network.

At the old firehouse site on Vandenberg AFB property, two mobile vet laboratories are operational. The oiled birds are being brought to them via one of two wildlife care transport trailers.

While these mobile facilities are not equipped for the most complicated and long-term rehabilitation of the injured birds, it is an essential triage and staging unit, in which they are stabilized, and can be relocated. When the birds are brought in, they are immediately processed and their conditions recorded in a log. They receive medical evaluation, medication, and are cleaned as well as possible.

Diedre Goodfriend, of IBRRC, said she has worked with oiled animals at six similar operations in California, and three in other nations.

"It's always better in California, because of the quick response," Goodfriend said. "It's always an emotional thing to see animals in distress, but at least we know we're helping them."

Meanwhile, the operation continues. Most of the birds captured to date have been caught with hand nets, but Kelly says they will start using a net-capture-gun system, where a larger net is literally shot from a pistol, toward its target. This enables rescuers to grab birds that are otherwise difficult to catch, from a distance of up to 30 feet.

Thus far, only one bird on the Endangered Species List — a brown pelican — has been caught, oiled, and no animals other than birds. However, the OWCN is able to treat any animal, and California's southern sea otters are at-risk, in this situation.

"We know there are more out there, who need out help, and we're ready for them," Kelly said.

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NOTE: This news release, along with several photographs taken today at the wildlife care site, can be accessed and downloaded from the Department of Fish and Game web page:

www.dfg.ca.gov