

California Department of Fish and Wildlife News Release

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CDFW Interagency Task Force narrows identity of “Mystery Goo” that impacted East Bay birds

California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), in collaboration with laboratories from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration and the California Department of Public Health, determined that the “mystery goo” that began impacting East Bay birds in mid-January contained a mixture of non-petroleum-based fats or oils. Non-petroleum oils include synthetic oils, such as silicone fluids, tung oils, and wood-derivative oils such as resin/rosin oils. Animal fats and oil, and edible and inedible seed oils from plants are included too. This material degraded to a sticky, thick consistency that was very difficult to remove from the feathers of affected birds.

On January 16, 2015 seabirds began turning up in the East Bay covered with this “mystery goo.” CDFW, along with other agencies began working on the identity of the contaminant. International Bird Rescue took the lead in caring for 323 birds that were captured alive. An additional 170 birds were collected dead. The number of impacted birds that may have sank, lost to predation, or missed during searches is unknown.

The contaminant, ranging in consistency from an oily or gummy substance to a hard varnish, coated East Bay seabirds, severely compromising their ability to stay warm, float, fly and locate food.

Non-petroleum-based fats or oils that come in contact with the hair and feathers of wildlife can cause similar effects as petroleum products, including loss of thermal insulation and buoyancy. Secondary effects can include hypothermia, starvation, drowning, predation, entrapment, suffocation, opportunistic infections and death.

“This was like a giant jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces to put together,” said OSPR Environmental Scientist Janna Rinderneck. “We had many possibilities of what this material could be. Working together, the laboratories have narrowed that list.”

The investigation continues to identify the source of the contaminant. If you have any information on the incident, contact CalTIP at 1-888-334-2258.

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