



CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
OFFICE OF SPILL PREVENTION AND RESPONSE



News Release

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Central coast tarballs identified

The Department of Fish and Game Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) has identified the tarballs that washed up on central coast beaches, last week. Their chemical makeup indicates that they are natural seep oil, classified as Monterey Formation.

The small, sticky globs of tar had littered the shoreline from San Francisco's Ocean Beach to Asilomar Beach at Pacific Grove, for about a week, starting on February 10, 2007.

OSPR, San Mateo County and State Parks staff collected samples of the tarballs at Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, Manresa, Sunset, and Asilomar State Beaches. OSPR's petroleum chemistry laboratory near Sacramento "fingerprinted" the oil, using gas chromatography-mass spectrometry analysis. This chemical analysis makes it possible to determine the original source of the oil, and whether it has been refined. In this case it was local oil, released naturally.

In the ocean, these oily blobs solidify to some degree, pick up other floating debris and sand, and eventually become asphalt-like. Most of those found in this case were about the size of marbles. In other cases, they have ranged from pea-sized to patties as much as three feet in diameter. The more weathered tarballs are, the harder and drier they become, and the less likely to stick to marine life. Once ashore, however, sunshine and warmer temperatures can soften and liquefy them, making them a greater hazard to wildlife, pets and people.

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