

California State Parks and Department of Fish and Game



News Release

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Source of oil that killed seabirds identified;

State will remove oil from historic cement ship at Seacliff State Beach

Fuel oil that's killed more than 50 seabirds since 2004, will be removed from the SS Palo Alto, Seacliff State Beach, beginning Tuesday, Sept. 5. Expected completion of the oil removal operation on the historic 1919 World War I tanker is mid-October.

California's Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) – the pollution division of the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) – will lead the project in partnership with the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), which owns the historic cement ship. OSPR will work to ensure that the oil is safely removed without causing any damage to the popular local landmark.

After a lengthy investigation and oil fingerprinting, OSPR's Petroleum Chemistry Laboratory identified the *SS Palo Alto* as the source of oil that has killed 51 birds and left another 19 injured since 2004. Authorities have long believed that all the oil had been removed from the vessel. The 87-year-old ship is in an accelerated state of deterioration, allowing diving birds such as cormorants access to internal compartments.

Inspectors found oil in some of the ship's tanks in July, and will search for additional oil, as this project begins. Accessible oil will be removed by precision mechanical techniques that will not cause any further damage to the eroding vessel. Additionally, screen barriers will be fabricated and installed to prevent birds from entering the oil tanks in the future. The screens will only affect areas nearest to the oil tanks. They will not prevent wildlife access to other parts of the ship where they breed and shelter in areas unaffected by the oil.

From September 5 to completion of the project, some Seacliff State Beach parking areas and the pier leading to the *Palo Alto* must be closed for public safety. OSPR scheduled the work to be done in September because the local bird population is lowest, the summer tourist season is concluding, and tide, current and weather conditions are most favorable for worker safety and efficiency.

OSPR has deemed the oil trapped aboard the deteriorating *SS Palo Alto* to constitute an imminent threat to the environment. Removing the old oil from the cement ship will not only protect wildlife and the environment now; it will also help prevent a future oil spill, as the vessel continues to deteriorate.

Built as an oil tanker for World War I, the *Palo Alto* was launched in Oakland in 1919. The vessel remained in Suisun Bay among the Navy's mothball fleet in Benicia for a decade, before the Cal-Neva Company purchased it in 1929 and towed it to its current location in Aptos. There, it was intentionally grounded. The lower decks were flooded and the upper decks turned into an amusement center. Two years later, the owners took the vessel out of business and the ship was stripped. Cal-Neva later sold it to State Parks for one dollar, and it quickly became a popular fishing pier. It also became a kind of artificial reef, attracting fish, crustaceans, barnacles, seabirds, and harbor seals.

As time, surf and weather eroded the *Palo Alto*, and its deck became dangerous, State Parks had to block access, to protect public health and safety. The public pier that connects the ship to the beach will reopen once the project is completed. DPR expects to re-open the pier in time for the Monte Foundation fireworks show scheduled for Oct. 14.



WEB SITES FOR PROJECT PROGRESS UPDATES

www.dfg.ca.gov/ospr/ — Click on “*SS Palo Alto Project*” in center column, to see an informal web-log of progress and photos from DFG-OSPR.

www.stateparks.ca.gov — Click on link for “*SS Palo Alto Project*”

DFG is the public trustee for the protection and management of California's native wildlife and the habitats upon which they depend. OSPR is DFG's pollution response division, and the lead State agency for off-highway oil spill prevention, response and restoration. OSPR's objective is to prevent resource damage, minimize impacts, restore and rehabilitate California's wildlife populations and their habitats from the harmful effects of oil and other deleterious material spills in marine and inland waters and their associated habitats through the use of the best achievable technology and protection. Since its creation in 1990, OSPR staff have responded to over 3,000 spills, and collected more than \$130 million in natural resource damage assessments to be used for spill restoration projects. For more information, please visit us on the Internet at www.dfg.ca.gov/ospr.

DPR is responsible for 278 park units within the State Park System. They make up the finest and most diverse collection of natural, cultural, and recreational resources in California. These treasures are as diverse as California: From the last stands of primeval redwood forests to vast expanses of fragile desert; from the lofty Sierra Nevada to the broad sandy beaches of our southern coast; and from the opulence of Hearst Castle to the vestiges of colonial Russia and the grandeur of the State Capitol building. DPR's mission is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation. For more information, please visit us on the Internet at www.parks.ca.gov.