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Monterey Bay Bird Incident - Update - Vegetable Oil Spill Dissipating

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SANTA CRUZ, California ---- The oily substance that disabled over 400 birds in Monterey Bay appears to be dissipating, naturally. Tentatively identified as a hydrogenated vegetable oil, the material is breaking-up in the surf.

U.S. Coast Guard and California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) pollution investigators and a representative from Clean Bay, a local pollution-response company, determined yesterday that mechanical clean-up of the oil is impossible.

"We tried to mop it up with the sorbent pads we use in petroleum spills, and even tried to pick it up with fine mesh nets," said Coast Guard Officer Pete Gautier. "Neither the pads nor the netting would pick up any of the material in the water."

"What little is coming ashore is in tiny bits that shouldn't hurt anything," said State Parks Ranger Stephanie Price, "and ought to break down fairly rapidly." Since the material is non-toxic, it is only a nuisance to humans. Crustaceans have been seen eating the small, putty-like bits, suggesting that natural processes may be the most efficient clean-up solution.

The substance mats the feathers of near-shore birds, making it impossible for them to fly. Because birds depend on their feathers for insulation, oiled birds are vulnerable to hypothermia. Many of the affected birds were already weak and stressed by their recent migratory flight from the Arctic. Being handled by humans in the rescue operation increases the stress level and, therefore, the risk of death. To date, only three percent of the birds brought to the DFG Oiled Wildlife Veterinary Care and Research Center in Santa Cruz have died.

"That's a lot fewer than the roughly 30 percent we'd expect to lose in a petroleum spill," according to Dr. David Jessup, Director of the Center.

Only ten birds were brought to the Center on Tuesday, a significant drop from the previous three days. Over four-hundred birds have received care at the DFG Center, which was designed to handle approximately 100.

Volunteers from Friends of the Sea Otter, International Bird Rescue Research Center (IBRRC), Santa Cruz Native Animal Rescue, Monterey and Santa Cruz SPCA, Peninsula Humane Society, The Lindsey Museum, the University of California Santa Cruz (Docents and Friends of Long Marine Lab), local veterinarians, and dozens of convergent volunteers are working around the clock to treat the sick birds.

Additional reliable volunteers with a wide variety of skills are still needed. We also need king- sized sheets, new or used, donated. They are used to cover pens holding the birds.

The public is requested -- again -- to stay away from wildlife. Injured or distressed animals are unpredictable, and may strike out in self-defense. Dead birds should also be left alone, where they are. Removing them will hamper efforts to track the overall impact of this incident.

The source and cause of the spill remain under investigation. Anyone with information that may aid this investigation is encouraged to telephone the Coast Guard Command Duty Officer at 510- 437-3073, or CalTIP (Californians Turn In Poachers and Polluters), at 1-888-DFG-CALTIP (334- 2258).

Individuals interested in volunteering to help may telephone the volunteer coordinator at 1-800-228-4544.

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