



# *Unified Command News Release*



## **SAN MATEO MYSTERY OIL SPILL**

**DATE:** January 18, 2002      **TIME:** 2:00 P.M.

### **Oil killing seabirds matches oil from 1997 mystery spill**

The California Dept. of Fish and Game Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) and U.S. Coast Guard have determined that samples from the San Mateo Mystery Spill match oil samples from the Point Reyes I and II tarball incidents, which occurred from November 16, 1997, off and on through February 20, 1998. OSPR scientists believe that incident may have killed as many as 10,000 seabirds. Over 2,000 dead birds were collected, that winter.

“The fact that these spill samples match gives more weight to the possibility that the oil came from a sunken vessel,” said OSPR Administrator Harlan Henderson, “but we haven’t ruled out other possibilities. We are committed to continue using all the resources and technologies available to find the source of this oil.”

OSPR’s Petroleum Chemistry Lab is comparing oil samples taken from bird feathers, tarballs, and the sheen the Coast Guard found in mid-December, with oil from past spills and from sunken vessels, wherever possible. To date, the PCL has tested approximately 50 of the 80 oil samples it has received.

The Coast Guard’s Marine Safety Laboratory in Groton, Connecticut, independently confirmed the State’s finding that oil samples from the current “mystery spill” is the same product as that collected from birds and tarballs in the 1997-98 incidents.

Investigators from the Coast Guard, OSPR and the State Lands Commission identified several vessels that transited the area on multiple occasions, and have sent oil samples to their

labs for analysis. OSPR has purchased satellite images of the waters off northern-central California, one of which shows three oil slicks, south of the Farallon Islands. Investigators will compare the slick locations in the satellite images to vessel movement and sunken vessel data.

The Coast Guard and OSPR — which make-up the Unified Command directing response to the oil spill that has injured over 1,250 seabirds — have expanded their investigation in the current bird-oiling case. We have created a “Source Identification Team” to research all possible sources of the oil, including sunken vessels. In addition to Coast Guard and OSPR personnel, that team includes National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and State Lands Commission staff.

The search for an oil slick continues with overflights by either the Dept. of Fish and Game, the Coast Guard or their contractor, Clean Bay. Sites of known sunken vessels that may contain petroleum products have been identified, and the pilots have been directed to fly over the sites, when they search for oil. Known sunken vessels in the area include the WWII aircraft carrier USS Independence, two Navy oilers, and the aft end of the chemical tanker Puerto Rican.

The agencies are also looking into the use of underwater R.O.V.s — Remotely-Operated-Vehicles — and side-looking sonar equipment that could help pinpoint exact wreck locations and possible leaks from them.

“The CG is analyzing this recurring problem from every angle, and we won’t be satisfied until the mystery is solved,” said Lt. Tim Callister, US Coast Guard. “We will continue to support wildlife recovery and rehabilitation efforts as long as it takes.”

Another process being employed is “hind-casting” — studying the reverse trajectory of ocean currents, to see from where they might have carried oil and/or oiled wildlife to our shores. Staff are studying ocean currents, their flow directions and seasonal changes, then plotting the patterns backwards, hoping THAT will lead to the source or sources.

The State Oiled Wildlife Care Network’s rescue center in Cordelia needs more volunteers, age 18 or older to help with bird rehabilitation work. No previous experience or

training is needed for most volunteer positions. People who would like to serve in positions that involve handling the oiled birds must first complete a four-hour training class. Volunteers work four-hour shifts, helping the professional staff prepare bird food, clean pools and wash soiled towels. Shifts run from 8 A.M. to noon, noon to 4 P.M., and 4 P.M. to 8 P.M. Anyone wishing to volunteer should call the center at 707-207-0380, extension 107.

Of the 1254 birds captured or collected to date, 535 were alive and 719 were dead on arrival. Of the 535 live birds, 52 are still receiving care; 313 have died, and 170 have been cleaned, rehabilitated, and returned to the wild. They are still being found between Point Reyes and Pacific Grove, and still the vast majority being recovered are common murre.

**MEDIA CONTACTS:**

Dana Michaels, OSPR Public Affairs: 916-327-9948 — [dmichael@ospr.dfg.ca.gov](mailto:dmichael@ospr.dfg.ca.gov)  
Lt. Tim Callister, U.S. Coast Guard: 510-437-3143 — [tcallister@d11.uscg.mil](mailto:tcallister@d11.uscg.mil)

**WEBSITES:**

Dept. of Fish & Game - OSPR — <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/Ospr/index.html>  
U.S. Coast Guard — <http://www.uscg.mil/D11/index.htm>  
Oiled Wildlife Care Network — <http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/owcn/default.asp>  
International Bird Rescue Research Center — <http://www.ibrrc.org>

