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DATE: February 6, 1996
TIME: 4:00 P.M.

North Coast Oil Identified

Preliminary results from the State Department of Fish and Game's petroleum chemistry lab indicates that the oil "tar-patties" that washed onto California's north coast, last week, are most likely bunker fuel. "Bunker" is a very heavy fuel oil used by large ships.

The Office of Oil Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR), a division of the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is investigating the spill, in an attempt to determine the source(s) of the oil.

Similar tar-patties have come ashore in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia, in the past four weeks. Environment Canada (the Canadian equivalent of the United States' EPA) reports that test results on oil samples from British Columbia are consistent with bunker fuel.

According to Bill Castle, Supervising Chemist for OSPR, nine of eleven oil samples from eight locations — from Oregon to Point Reyes — are chemically similar. "Although the oil cannot be chemically ruled out as a California seep oil, it's not likely that seep oil would be the same, over such an expanse of coastline," Castle said, referring to natural oil tar-balls. The matching samples were taken from Beverly Beach State Park in central Oregon, Crescent City, Steamboat Rock near Cape Mendocino, MacKerricher State Park, and four beaches at Point Reyes National Seashore (McClure's Beach, South Beach, Kehoe Beach, and Ten-Mile Beach).

The two oil samples that do not match the other nine are definitely not from California marine seeps, but are consistent with each other. They were taken from a tar-patty and an oiled bird at MacKerricher State Park. All of the eleven samples are consistent with bunker fuel. Castle has received a chemistry report from Environment Canada, and expects a sample of the oil spilled there, in the next few days, as well as a

sample from the State of Washington, for comparison to the California and Oregon tar-patties.

No more oiled wildlife has been found since twenty dead, oiled, marine birds were collected from the Point Reyes area, last week. The oiled California coastline includes sensitive habitat for marine birds, shore birds, waterfowl, crabs, seals, and sea lions.

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