

July tar balls probably a natural occurrence

Scientist sees no signs that tar balls came from tanker leak

Gary Warth, Escondido North County Times, 8-6-10

Tar balls that washed ashore on Oceanside and Encinitas beaches in July probably seeped up naturally through the ocean floor, rather than from a leaking well or oil tanker, a state scientist said Friday.

"I have a verbal confirmation that this is consistent with natural seep oil," environmental scientist Kris Wiese said about a phone conversation he had with an official at the Petroleum Chemistry Laboratory in Sacramento.

Underground oil can escape at times from hydrocarbon seepage spots on the ocean floor, including off the shores of La Jolla and Oceanside, according to Peter Lonsdale, a professor of marine geology at Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Wiese, a scientist with the state's Department of Fish and Game's Office of Spill Prevention and Response in San Diego, said he's still waiting for a written report from the laboratory.

The tar balls, ranging from quarter-size to platter-size, washed ashore every day for about 10 days in early July.

While not an everyday occurrence, tar balls on the sand are nothing new for frequent beachgoers.

"My observation was that it was pretty much an average tar ball event," Wiese said. "I've seen tar ball events of that magnitude or worse twice in the last two years in San Diego."

With daily reports of millions of gallons of oil spilling into the Gulf of Mexico following the BP Deepwater Horizon drilling rig accident in April, people reportedly were sensitive to the sight of tar balls on local beaches.

A lifeguard at Oceanside's Buccaneer Beach in July said that people who saw them were "freaking out because of recent oil spills."

Tar balls can be an indication of oil spills, Wiese said, but they also may have leaked from natural fissures, possibly from the Monterey Formation, an oil-rich region throughout California that includes some off-shore islands.

Telling the difference between man-caused and naturally occurring tar balls involves analyzing their composition to determine whether they are pure or processed, Wiese said.

If they are not natural, scientists look for chemical "fingerprints" in hopes of finding their source.

If that source is identified, the responsible party can be fined, with the money used for cleaning up the spill, Wiese said.

But with a natural occurrence, there are no funds to pay for cleanups or any group assigned to the task, so the tar is left to wash away naturally over time, he said.

"We're not natural-seep chasers," he said about his office's responsibilities. "We're out to stop people who are

negligently dumping. The stuff we usually are dealing with is processed oil."

Wiese said keeping track of natural tar balls that wash ashore may help his office investigate unnatural spills in the future.

"We will routinely pick up tar balls on the beach when I find them so they can start putting together a better representation of oil we're finding on the beach," he said.

Following a method used in Santa Barbara, Wiese said he hopes to compile a database to determine when tar balls occur naturally to help streamline the detection process.

When tar balls appear outside of a normal period, he said, scientists will have more reason to suspect the source may be a well or tanker leak, allowing his office to respond faster.