

# Tar balls wash up in Oceanside, Encinitas

Mike Lee, San Diego Union-Tribune, 7-19-10

Tar balls have washed ashore at two beaches in North County, creating squishy messes across a few hundred yards of sand near Witherby Street in Oceanside and at a popular spot in Encinitas.

“I was at Moonlight Beach on the northern edge watching my kids at junior lifeguards and noticed lots of tar patches on the beach,” said Dan Palmatier of Encinitas said Monday afternoon. “It seemed like every 10 paces or so, I would see a large tar splat.”

Lifeguards said Monday that they had not seen the oily objects on Oceanside city beaches, but coastal visitors and the Coast Guard found them north of Buccaneer Beach Park.

“They ranged from nickel-sized up to about a baseball — 3 or 4 inches in diameter, but not thick. They were patties,” said Petty Officer Justin Pryor at the Coast Guard in San Diego.

Although small amounts of tar balls generally are not considered a health hazard, Pryor said beachgoers should avoid touching them.

While the source of the tar found Monday is unknown, the two main contenders are offshore oil seeps and ships.

Pryor said the balls likely are from natural causes because they are similar to tar found in Coronado last year. In April 2009, tar balls washed up there, prompting emergency crews to collect enough to fill a 55-gallon drum.

The Coast Guard had the objects tested by state oil experts, who determined they were from a natural seep. Pryor said it’s not clear whether the Oceanside tar balls will be tested.

Geologist Pat Abbott, a professor emeritus at San Diego State University, said he believes the tar is probably from an accident on a ship or an intentional discharge from a vessel.

Oil products are common on the beaches in the Santa Barbara area, but Abbott doesn’t recall tar balls coming ashore in Oceanside before. His problem with the seep theory is that San Diego County doesn’t have the same large formations of Miocene-era rock and oil deposits that are common to the north.

Abbott said there are small Miocene formations in Oceanside, so “I can’t rule out the possibility that it is natural.”

If that were the case, however, he would expect to see similar events more frequently.

One possibility raised by Abbott is that the string of earthquakes that has rattled the region over the past few months has altered the undersea geology enough to let oil escape in North County.

“The same fault that generates an earthquake could be a conduit or an open space for the oil and gas to migrate to the surface,” he said.

Tar on beaches on San Diego County isn’t common, but it’s not unheard of, either.

“We had quite a few tar balls wash up on the beach near Scripps Institution of Oceanography ... about six weeks ago.” said Jim Means, a graduate student at the campus, which is part of the University of California San Diego. “There was enough of it so that it was difficult to avoid while walking. I bought some special detergent just to remove the tar from my feet and sandals. After a few days, it was gone from the beach.”