

# Conference focuses on oil-spill preparedness

Carolyn Jones, San Francisco Chronicle, 5-12-10

The Bay Area may be among the best prepared regions in the country to respond to a major oil spill, due in part to lessons learned from the Cosco Busan and Dubai Star leaks, but there are still improvements to be made, officials said at a summit Tuesday in Oakland.

"The previous two spills in the bay were test cases, so we're in a lot better shape than if those accidents hadn't happened," said Judy Kelly, director of the San Francisco Estuary Partnership, which organized the conference to look at how local oil spill response can improve. The group represents about 100 nonprofits, state and federal agencies, and businesses that promote the health of San Francisco Bay.

"We're as prepared as people can be," Kelly said. "But who could be prepared for something like what happened in the gulf?"

The conference was planned before an oil rig blast on April 20 led to an enormous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico - a calamity that was frequently referred to as a worst-case scenario at the Tuesday event.

## Two major spills

In 2007, 54,000 gallons of bunker fuel leaked into San Francisco Bay when the Cosco Busan container ship struck the Bay Bridge. The contamination killed more than 2,400 birds and soiled 26 miles of coastline with black slime, partly because of the slow and disorganized response to the spill after it was initially reported. In October, the Dubai Star tanker spilled 420 gallons of oil into the bay during a fueling mishap, and officials responded much faster than before. The oil dirtied the Alameda shoreline and killed about 20 birds.

After the Cosco Busan spill, the U.S. Coast Guard, which oversees most oil spill responses, made three main improvements in its response plan for the Bay Area. It now hosts bimonthly meetings for all the government agencies involved in the response, has drawn up a plan for volunteers who show up at beaches without having undergone training, and has created a liaison position to coordinate efforts among the hundreds of public agencies involved in a clean-up. During the Cosco Busan disaster, dozens of volunteers who showed up to help clean soiled beaches were turned away.

The Coast Guard still needs to improve community relations and beef up its removal of abandoned boats, a persistent source of oil leaks in the bay, said Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Gus Bannan.

"Are we prepared? I think so," he said. "We're much better prepared than we have been in the last year or two."

Environmentalists and others said they want to see a centralized communications system, comprehensive data on the bay and plenty more boom - the chains of rubber fenders used to contain oil spills.

Bannan denied that more boom is needed. Boom is most effective in currents slower than those typically found in the bay, he said, and the Bay Area already has more than 10,000 feet of boom, plenty to handle a major spill.

But environmentalists said boom should be deployed every time a ship refuels in the bay. Boom would have contained 80 percent of the Dubai Star spill, which occurred when the ship was refueling from a barge about 2 miles south of the Bay Bridge.

"More boom, and more people trained to use it, is the difference between a successful response and a failure," said Fred Felleman, an environmental consultant who spoke at the summit.

### **Looking for action**

U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Washington, and state Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, have both introduced legislation that would require booms when ships refuel. Currently, in California, ships must carry boom on board but are not required to deploy it during refueling.

Zeke Grader, director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, said that is not enough.

"If they say the currents are too great for boom, then damn it, you don't refuel," Grader said. "We need action, not excuses."

Lisa Owens-Viani, outreach coordinator of the estuary partnership, agreed.

"After the Cosco Busan spill, when I saw all these birds suffocating in oil, or shivering with hypothermia, I determined that we should never let this happen again," she said. "Do we need more boom? I don't know, but it certainly couldn't hurt."