

# Oil spills drop; Greka still main offender

Colby Frazier, Santa Barbara Independent, 5-12-10

While the volume of onshore oil spills in Santa Barbara County has fallen sharply in recent years, it has hardly stopped despite efforts by regulatory agencies to clamp down on chronic spillers.

A quarterly report presented to the Board of Supervisors yesterday showed that 32,675 gallons of crude oil and polluted water spewed onto local soil in 2009. Although the number pales in comparison to 2007 and 2008 when Greka Oil and Gas Inc., one of the county's largest onshore oil operators, was responsible for a multitude of spills totaling more than 200,000 gallons, some supervisors were outraged at last year's total.

"I find it to be totally unacceptable," 2nd District Supervisor Janet Wolf, the board chair, said during the meeting.

In addition to the spills, county officials cited 539 violations at 50 onshore oil facilities in 2009, according to the report. Of those, 52 violations remained open as of yesterday, while 19 facilities were operating with violations.

The decline in the overall volume of spills was credited to the county's stepped-up enforcement. After Greka's string of high-profile spills, county officials went to work drafting stricter ordinances.

Dianne Black, director of development services for the county's department of Planning and Development, said the lower volume in spills reflects an increased vigilance by the county and oil operators in recent years.

"I see that as a very positive effect of both operators and the various agencies really paying attention to the facility operations and diligently using the tools that we have," she said.

But despite the county's efforts to add teeth to its ordinance, one supervisor saw a gaping hole.

Black noted that in order for an oil company to run afoul of the county's high-risk ordinance, it must be responsible for three spills, with each spill totaling at least 25 barrels, or 1,050 gallons.

During 2009, only two spills topped this mark. On April 16, 2009 14,994 gallons of polluted water spilled at a Greka facility. Two months later, 11,928 gallons of polluted water was spilled at a Plains Exploration & Production Co. lease.

Although Greka didn't technically qualify as a "high-risk" spiller, it was responsible for 32 of the 38 crude oil, polluted water and toxic gas discharges recorded in 2009.

Carbajal was appalled that the threshold to qualify as a large spill was 25 barrels. "We need to change that," he said. "That is ridiculous ... That is unacceptable."

Through the first four months of 2010, 240 gallons of crude oil has spilled at four different facilities, three owned by Greka and one by Plains Exploration.

An additional 84 gallons of polluted water has spilled.

Carbajal requested the minimum spill amount be chopped to a lower figure. In an interview after the meeting, he said he expected the matter would return to the board in the next few months.