

# The Summerland Seepage Mystery

*Supes Demand Answers from State on Oily Offshore Mess*

**Ethan Stewart, Santa Barbara Independent, 4-7-11**

Long since abandoned, century-old oil wells off the coast of Summerland were vilified this week at the County Board of Supervisors. Responding directly to public cries of concern about a relatively recent increase in the amount of oil washing up along the beaches of Summerland and floating just offshore, the supes voted unanimously to send a letter to the state regulatory agencies in charge of the old wells, demanding an investigation into the alleged leaks. Calling out the California State Lands Commission, which technically owns the wells, and the state's Division of Oil and Gas and Geothermal Resources, which is responsible for the capping of said wells, 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal summed up the situation on Tuesday: "Frankly, this is a disaster waiting to happen unless one of our government agencies steps up and takes responsibility."

Before it became the quaint coastal antiquing capital of the South Coast that it is today, with a reputation for stunningly scenic and often empty beaches, Summerland was the hub of Santa Barbara's oceanic oil rush at the start of the 20th century — the beach providing ground zero for a series of piers and primitive oil rigs harvesting crude from hundreds of offshore wells. Eventually, the oil boom became a bust and the various operators pillaging petroleum from the piers packed up and left, long before rules and regulations governing oil company exit strategies were ever invented. The result is a legacy of some 400 old wells off the coast of Santa Barbara County, the bulk of them off Summerland and Coal Oil Point in Goleta, that were left for dead — with a wide variety of rather inadequate capping techniques such as using logs, trash, telephone poles, and rocks to block up the oil-spilling sea-floor sores. Acknowledging this situation, the county's head of the Office of Emergency Services, Michael Harris, told the supes this week, "[The wells] were either just abandoned or capped inappropriately ... really whatever they could do to stop the leaking was used."

Of course, the hullabaloo about potential oil leaks from the old wells in Summerland is nothing new. In fact, efforts were made by the state starting in 1990 to cap three specific historic wells in Summerland that were identified as being particularly prone to spewing crude. But to hear residents tell it, things have taken a decided turn for the worse in recent months, especially off the western end of Lookout Park. "This is not just a few tar balls," testified longtime resident and regular beachgoer Blair Whitney on Tuesday. "It is a sickly orange film that is all over the sand at low tide and there is a sheen of thick orange goo that goes all across the waters at the west end of Summerland Beach." And Whitney isn't alone. Not only were his observations echoed by several other Summerland residents on Tuesday, but Harris added that it is "not uncommon" for his office to receive calls from residents reporting what, according to him, is "generally described as copious amounts of oil in the waters off Summerland."

In the end, the supes voted to send a letter to both regulatory agencies asking for a representative to come down to Santa Barbara later this summer and provide an overview of the old-well situation, an update on the presumably fixed wells from the 1990s, and an answer, once and for all, as to whether or not the levels of oil seen and smelled in Summerland are truly the result of leaks or just the manifestation of naturally occurring seeps. According to Carbajal, whose district includes Summerland, the letter, if unsuccessful, will only be the start of a redoubled effort to get the state to take responsibility. Explaining that he has already been in talks with Assemblymember Das Williams about potential legislation on the subject, Carbajal said defiantly, "We are trying to do this administratively first, but nothing prevents us from going to the legislators ... If we don't get a response [from the letter] then we have to ramp up the political pressure."